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FORGOTTEN REALMS

Part 5

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR PROFIT

*The search for a kidnapped bride
faces new perils...*



Dave Gross

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David Gross

An Opportunity for Profit

Chapter 1

A Sailor's Life

A sailor's life is ruled by precious few constant joys, thought Sharessa. One of those is the sight of land after a hard voyage. The crew and passengers of the Morning Bird paused to share a silent expectation after the first cry of "Land!" from the lookout perched high in the rigging. All eyes peered hard at the western horizon, the warm sun upon their bare heads. When the first line of shore defined itself against the gray sea, the pregnant sails seemed to tremble with the collective sigh of sailor and mercenary alike.

Then the ship lurched suddenly forward, and all smiles stopped.

Sharessa also knew that a sailor's life is ruled by many fears. Food stores can run out or spoil far from shore. Storms can sweep a vessel from its course. Mutiny and disease can easily insinuate their black fingers through the close-packed ship's crew. All these terrors serve a queen fear, the dreadful monarch of shipboard nightmare.

"We're sinking!" cried the lookout.

The panic was brief but powerful. The crewmen stood paralyzed for a moment, waiting for Captain Turbalt to give their orders. The fat Tharkaran seaman stood staring at the shore, eyes wide in disbelief. It was a wonder he had survived the journey so far. He was made for easy commerce and fretless journeys.

"You three," called Belmer, encircling three crewmen with a gathering finger. "Check the starboard hull. And you three, port." The sailors glanced briefly at their captain, then obeyed the small, hard, olive-skinned man.

"Sharkers, help with the sails," he continued. With economical grace, he walked along the port side of the deck, leaning over to check the outer hull every ten feet or so. The brilliant sun was reflected by a thousand ripples of the Great Sea of the Utter East. Belmer's figure, standing above the mercenaries, was bathed in light. Sharessa stared at him until her eyes watered, and Belmer's silhouette seemed to split into a multitude of dark figures.

The slim, dark-haired pirate worked with Anvil and Brindra, helping the nervous sailors make the most of the modest wind. She hadn't felt an impact, but the sluggish motion of the ship could only mean a hull breach. The Morning Bird lurched again, this time reeling starboard. Surprised, Sharessa stumbled and fell. Her strong hands gripped the rail just in time to keep her aboard, but the sudden

motion tipped her halfway over the side. The ship rolled back, and she started to pull herself on deck. She stopped when she saw the outer hull.

Just above the water line, the Morning Bird's timbers were rotting away before Shar's eyes. One board was sundered already, and those that remained stared out with a thousand hollow eyes, pitted and withered. As she watched, she saw the surface of the hull shrink and writhe.

"Look at this!" she called. Anvil and Brindra were at her side at once.

"Nine hells!" cursed Anvil.

"Maybe Belmer didn't kill Redbeard's wizard after all," suggested Sharessa. She suppressed a shudder at the memory of Belmer's sudden stab into the magical eye they had discovered aboard a few days ago.

"Damn his eyes," said Anvil. "I wish Kurthe had killed-"

"Hsst!" warned Brindra. Her eyes flicked behind them. Belmer was coming toward them.

"— killed Redbeard," continued Anvil, with only a brief hesitation. "And his thrice-damned wizard. Whatever's eating this ship, it's sorcery."

Brindra nodded, her eyes still on Belmer as he leaned over the edge to see the damage. When he stood up again, he seemed tiny beside Anvil's massive figure. Sharessa knew that despite his stature, he was the most dangerous man on the ship.

"Sorcery is right, and there's little we can do about that," Belmer said. "We might still make it to shore."

"Back to the sails," said Sharessa, anticipating his order. Belmer nodded at her.

"Have Rings, Belgin, and Ingrar join the men below," he added. "If they can reinforce the remaining timbers..."

"Aye," said Sharessa. He nodded curtly and turned away.

Since Kurthe's death at Belmer's hands, Sharessa had assumed an unspoken position of leadership among the pirates. It was to her that Belmer gave his commands for the Sharkers. Perhaps it was because she was the first to re-declare her obedience after the outlander put Kurthe's dagger into the pirate's own throat. Or maybe it was something else. She remembered that upon first meeting the Sharkers, Belmer had known her nickname, Shadow. That flattered her, but it also made her uncomfortable, especially since the Sharkers knew so little about their new employer. The man was made wholly of secrets.

After relaying Belmer's orders, Sharessa joined Anvil and Brindra at the rigging. No matter how much they distrusted Belmer, he had gotten them away from Redbeard's ship and through the mysterious fog that sped their journey. And the pay was good—more than good—if

they survived to collect it.

Across the deck, a handful of frightened sailors tried to follow Captain Turbalt's halting and contradictory commands. Sharessa was amazed that Belmer hadn't killed or at least deposed the craven captain and taken command himself. The Tharkaran had repeatedly proven himself cowardly and incompetent. Sharessa and the other Sharkers ignored him, tacking sail against the wind as best they could. The few sailors who remained calm followed the Sharkers' lead without question. Soon they worked in unison, silent in their determination to reach land before the ship sank.

A desperate hour later, the shore had grown larger but not yet close enough for swimming. Rings stomped up on deck, his craggy dwarven face red with exertion. A dozen electrum loops jingled from his ears, and one thick ring depended from his nose. A stench of hot tar followed him from below decks, as did three choking sailors.

"No good," said Rings. "It's moving faster. The hull's just dissolving before our eyes. Every time we patch a spot, another bursts open."

"If Belmer hadn't burned our deck boats..." began Brindra.

"Then we'd all have died back in Tharkar," snapped Sharessa.

Brindra's hot gaze bore into Sharessa's face. Shar stared coolly back, and after a moment the bigger woman looked away. Sharessa had been as astonished as anyone when Belmer purposefully set fire to the four deck boats during the first attack on the Morning Bird. The ploy had worked, however, and they had escaped that time.

Before Sharessa could think of anything to say to Brindra, Ingrar and Belgin staggered up on deck with the last of the repair crew. Ingrar's young face was red and puffy, his eyes streaming tears from the noxious tar. Belgin coughed into his hand, worse than usual.

"We're in for another swim," grumbled Belgin. Sharessa remembered the stench of burning flesh and the screams of their dying shipmates from the Kissing Shark. Were they cursed? This would be the second ship they'd lost in less than a moon's life.

"Sharkers," called Belmer from his high perch among the ropes. "Take the sails again. Turbalt, have your men form bailing lines."

"That won't work," whined Turbalt. "We'll never make it to..."

"Do as you're told," said Belmer. He looked at Turbalt's feet. The Tharkaran was standing on the dark stain that Kurthe had left, a reminder of the price of disobedience. Turbalt made a frantic little dance to move off the bloody spot.

The crew moved to obey Belmer without awaiting a command from their captain. Turbalt chewed the air and wept, muttering, "My ship

... my ship..."

No one spoke as they bailed and tacked. The ship sank lower and

lower, and soon the waves threw more water onto the deck than the men could bail. They would never make it all the way to shore. They worked only to close the distance. The shorter they had to swim, the less chance of becoming food for sharks.

A tremendous creak sounded from below, ending in a powerful crack. The Bird listed hard to port again. Sharessa could feel no more forward motion.

"We've struck a reef!" cried one of the ship's crew.

"No," called Rings. "We've lost another timber below the water line."

"We're lost! We're sunk!" screamed Turbalt.

"Ye're right about that, at least," grumbled Rings. He was busy strapping his axes tightly to his back. The other Sharkers followed his example and gathered their belongings. Some of the crewmen were doing the same, while others-including Turbalt himself-had already flung themselves into the water and begun swimming to avoid the deadly suction of a sinking vessel.

"Ready?" asked Belmer. He had made a pack for himself, including a lantern and a long coil of rope, which he handed to Anvil. The big man looped it over his thick shoulder without comment. The Sharkers all touched their gear one last time, hoping it wasn't too much to carry to shore. One by one, they nodded and said, "Aye."

"Abandon ship."

Chapter Two

Into the Woods

Sharessa loved the sunset best near the shore. The open sea was too vast for its molten beauty. A million waves reflected and dispersed the dying light, diluting it with boundless distance. Near land, however, she could see the sun descend hot and swollen into the darkening horizon, casting purple shadows over the green hills. Sharessa could vanish into those shadows, silent and invisible, one with her namesake, the goddess of shadows.

Such escape would be a comfort after the past week of catastrophe and loss. Sharessa thought about how much had passed since they had agreed to follow Belmer.

At first, Sharessa and the other Sharkers had fallen into the old patterns of obedience. Belmer assumed command with such confidence that none questioned him—not even Kurthe, at first. It was more comfortable to follow than to lead, especially in the wake of the Kissing Shark's destruction. Ovrin Redbeard, a vicious rival, had burned their ship; their captain, Blackfingers Ralingor, had been a casualty of the disaster. Redbeard would have killed the rest of them back in Tharkar, if a surprising benefactor hadn't helped them escape.

Belmer had filled Blackfingers's place quickly, proving his promises with quick action. He had seen them safely out of the Tavern of the Masques, all right. He had even led them to a safe house below the Ankle Bells and discarded the fiction of his "Ambassador Droon" identity as soon as they were safe from pursuit. He'd asked for their trust, and he'd seemed to earn it. At least they'd had no better offers.

Moreover, Belmer offered payment beyond anything Sharessa had ever earned from pirating. Perhaps they had been too quick to jump at such an outrageous sum, but they were leaderless and hunted. Belmer's insistence on contracts did much to allay their suspicions. This they had seen before. It was just business.

Now Sharessa wasn't so sure it was good business. As their journey continued, they kept learning more about Belmer. He shed his disguise in Redbeard's first attack, and later he told them that they were to find a kidnapped woman and kill her.

Every time Sharessa thought she was beginning to understand the man, he removed another ruse, revealing another story she was sure would turn out to be yet another ruse. How could they trust him?

Finally, when Kurthe defied Belmer, the little man proved himself

a cold and deadly swordsman. Sharessa wanted to believe that Belmer had given Kurthe a chance to obey by drawing out the fight, but Anvil and Brindra seemed sure that Belmer was just playing with him, using his death as an example to the others. If so, the lesson had worked.

Still, the Sharkers were more afraid of drowning than of Belmer. Not so long ago, they had escaped the burning wreckage of their previous ship, the Kissing Shark. In the aftermath of Redbeard's surprise attack, the surviving Sharkers had swum through cold, black waters, the horrid odor of their burning shipmates in every gasping breath. The stink of hot pitch was far preferable.

"We keep outlasting our ships," said Jolloth Bur-buck. He stood beside Sharessa, turned away from the sun. The scars on his face grew deep and black in the shadows. Everyone who knew him called him "the Anvil" for his battered visage, but Shar also knew it was for his iron toughness. She nodded sadly and turned to follow his gaze, past the shore, where the beached crew of the Morning Bird slumped dejectedly, toward the listing mast of their sunken ship. The rest of the Tharkaran caravel lay beneath the surf, its hull sundered by magical rot.

Near Anvil and Sharessa, Brindra pushed herself up from the beach, slapping sand off her clothes with hands like thick slabs of pork. The muscles of her arms rippled in contrast to her barrel-shaped torso. As she rose, she towered over Rings, who stood with his own hairy arms crossed upon his chest. Together, the fat woman and the bald dwarf were the ugliest of the Sharkers. They looked right standing next to each other.

"Fortune smiles on the Sharkers," said Rings with a wink.

"Those the sea hasn't swallowed," countered Brindra with a scowl. There had been no distracting her since Belmer killed Kurthe. Sharessa knew that Brindra would never forgive that particular act of "discipline" from Belmer, even though their employer had transfixed the hot-headed Sharker with the same dagger Kurthe had thrown at him.

Behind Brindra and Rings stood Belgin and Ingrar, the two Edenvalers. Belgin wheezed and stroked his chin as if preparing to make some witty remark. Instead, he coughed into his fist. While fit enough for sailing and fighting, the chubby gambler seemed perpetually ill.

"It's getting dark," said Ingrar. His damp clothes clung to his youthful frame, and he shivered. But his eyes followed the dark-haired Sharesssa and the rivulets of water that ran down her tawny skin and coursed beneath her low-cut shirt.

Anvil nodded. "Where's Belmer? We should move inland before making camp."

Sharessa shook her head. "He was talking to the crew of the Morning Bird. He's in the forest now."

"Maybe he's decided to head to Eldrinpar by himself," suggested Ingrar. He looked worried, like a country boy who has lost track of his father in the city market. He peered into the dense woods, then closed his eyes to listen for any sound when he saw nothing.

"Good riddance, if he did," said Brindra. Rings put a hand on her thick biceps, but she shrugged it off angrily.

"But we have contracts," said Ingrar petulantly. Shar had to look again to see that the swim hadn't shrunk the young man back into a small child. He was more shaken by recent setbacks than anyone.

"Contracts mean little to a man who'll kill his own crew," spat Brindra.

"Hsst!" Ingrar hissed a warning. "You never know when he'll walk up behind you."

Brindra sneered, making her homely face even uglier. "We're out in the open. Unless he can hide behind a grain of sand..."

Rings turned his head suddenly, staring behind Brindra with eyes wide and mouth open. The big woman whirled, seeing nothing but empty beach behind her. Rings chuckled when Brindra tried to glare at him. She lost her stern expression when Sharessa covered her mouth to hide her own smile.

"Why, you miniature..."

"Belmer had no choice," said Rings, shifting back to the subject at hand. "Ye saw what happened, and y' know how Kurthe is."

"Was, you mean." Brindra tried to recover her menacing tone, but Rings had dulled her anger. "I know I'd rather have Kurthe here with us than that black snake. At least with Kurthe you knew what to expect. Belmer lies to us, and he vanishes every time."

"Enough," said Shar coldly. "Kurthe is dead."

"Let's finish our job," said Anvil, suddenly breaking his heavy silence. "The pay is more than we've ever seen before," said the brawny pirate, as the others turned to look at him. "When we're done, we'll choose our own captain." He looked pointedly at Sharessa.

Brindra grunted and looked at the sand. The others nodded, the dwarfs rings jingling faintly.

Sharessa shook back damp ringlets from her face and squared her slender shoulders. "Let's see what Turbalt's men salvaged from the ship. Maybe-"

"There he is," said Belgin. They all looked to where the pale Edenvaler pointed, and there was Belmer emerging from the green forest.

"Let's go hear our orders," said Shar.

"What?" said Brindra. "That's insane!"

Belmer gave the big woman a cold stare but said nothing else.

"She has a point, sir," said Rings as diplomatically as possible. "Why don't we just light a signal fire? We're so close to Eldrinpar that there's bound to be a ship by soon."

"I don't want to arrive by ship," said Belmer. "We'd have had Turbalt set us ashore before entering Eldrinpar anyway. Considering our task, the fewer who see us enter the city, the better. We'll set out across land tonight."

"The forests of Doegan are not safe," said Anvil. "Especially at night."

"After all the troubles we had at sea, you're afraid of walking through the woods?" Belmer seemed amused.

"Sir," said Sharessa. "We're pirates, not caravan guards. The sea's our place." She smiled silkily at Belmer. His eyes seemed to flicker a moment, and then his lips tightened.

"We're not talking about simple bandits or wild animals," said Belgin reasonably. "The fiends aren't natural creatures. They come from another world, and their powers-"

"The fiends of Doegan can tear a man apart," said Ingrar. His voice took on the cadence of a childhood rhyme. "They catch you up in iron claws and feast upon your heart. They break your bones with burning stones and-"

"Enough," interrupted Belmer. "You're being paid for dangerous work... and to obey."

"And so we will," said Sharessa quickly. "But they say there are even more fiends in the woods lately. An entire caravan was lost last month."

Belmer shrugged. "Rumor turns wolves into wyverns and foxes into fiends. If I'd thought a few forager's tales would frighten you off, I'd have hired Turbalt's crew for less."

Rings bristled at the reproach, and Brindra darkened, a muscle in her jaw twitching.

"It's true that we spend most of our time at sea," said Anvil. "But you can see the truth of it in their eyes in Eldrinpar. There's something out there." He stared into the darkening woods, and all the Sharkers' eyes followed his. Even Belmer glanced at the trees. Here and there a flash of color broke the monotony of the green, and the variety of plant species made the woods more a jungle. A distant sound of swallows lulled the sky to sleep.

"Maybe so," said Belmer. "But if there is anything out there, it would do well to fear us." He looked at each of the Sharkers in turn as he continued.

"You have lost much in the past days," he said. No one reacted to that statement of the obvious. "But you have survived in the face of

powerful adversity. Redbeard couldn't burn you with the Kissing Shark, and he couldn't catch you after. Every time we've been attacked, we've won through. You'll fail now only if you can't muster the strength that each victory gives you."

Brindra looked ready to say something, but Sharessa interrupted her. "We'll follow you on land as we did at sea, but we need rest tonight. And Turbalt's crew won't make it two mileb." The Sharkers muttered their agreement. The men of the Morning Bird weren't seasoned pirates like the Sharkers, and they were weaker for having a weak and indecisive captain.

"Well camp after we've made a good start through the woods," said Belmer. "But we leave the crew behind. They'll only slow us."

"But sir," protested Rings. "We can't just leave them shipwrecked." Sharessa felt the same way. The Sharkers were pirates, but they were sailors first. They couldn't abandon the crew that had brought them this far over sea.

Belmer's eyes narrowed. Sharessa feared for a moment that he might punish Rings as he had Kurthe. Instead, he considered Rings's words, smiled faintly, and said, "Very well. But if they slow us, we leave them."

"Aye," said Rings. "Aye," agreed the others, except for Brindra. Belmer didn't seem to notice, but Sharessa thought she saw his eyes slide briefly toward the big woman.

"According to Turbalt, we must head for the hills to the northeast," said Belmer. "Rings, you take Turbalt's men. Spread them out to find a likely path. We haven't much light left, so hurry."

"Aye, sir," said Rings. He sounded almost cheerful now that they were doing something again.

Belmer turned to Sharessa. She felt his eyes caress her body with a casualness that was almost insulting. "Take the waterskins from the salvage and fill them at the stream." He pointed to where he had emerged from the woods earlier. "Find some good branches for torches. There are only a few lanterns from the ship." "Aye."* #??

They left the beach and pushed into the forest. Their feet were silent on the thick loam, but everywhere they moved, thick fronds shushed in their wake. Only Sharessa moved quietly, slipping gently through the green leaves and branches. Her body was still used to the gentle motion of a ship's deck, and a floor that did not move seemed at once strange and reassuring.

"I hate this," muttered Brindra. She held her big arms close to her body. "You can't see anything through these trees."

"One night in the woods," said Sharessa. "Then a few days in the city, and we'll all go back to sea."

"I still hate it," said Brindra. The big woman had never liked land,

especially narrow city streets and thick forests. Her shudders were contagious. Sharessa felt the woods looming on all sides, too. Somehow it felt more confining than a tiny ship cabin. At least at sea, the open air was only a few steps away.

They found the stream, and Anvil shrugged off the mantle of waterskins he had draped over his shoulders. Sharessa took one and immediately began filling it with cool stream water.

"Let's hurry," she said. She turned to Anvil, putting a warm hand on the big man's arm. "See if you can find some good branches." He nodded and moved away, eyes seeking deadfall in the darkening twilight. The others knelt by the stream, plunging the goatskin bags into the stream.

As Sharessa stoppered the second waterskin, a piercing cry cut through the forest. The Sharkers froze and listened. For a long moment, the only sound they heard was that of the stream.

"It's just a bird," said Ingrar uncertainly.

"Listen!" Belgin lifted his waterskin out of the stream and laid it gently on the ground. They all listened but heard nothing.

"Anvil!" called Sharessa in a loud whisper.

"Right here," came the big man's rumble voice. Sharessa saw him standing no more than twenty yards away, crouched by a tilting shadowtop. Brindra and Belgin sighed audibly at the sight of him. They all fell silent again. A minute quietly strangled itself to death before anyone spoke.

"No birds," said Sharessa. The others nodded. They had heard neither the sparrows nor any other birds since the scream.

"Which way did it come from?" asked Sharessa. Brindra, Ingrar, and Belgin pointed south. When Anvil crept up, he nodded southeast.

"All right, let's go." Shar put down the waterskin, quietly loosened her sword in its scabbard, and led the way southeast.

They moved quickly through the slender trees. Ingrar cursed quietly upon entangling one foot in some creeping vines. Before he could slip out of them, Brindra slashed once with her curving cutlass, and he was free.

"Damned tangle," she spat.

"Quiet," said Sharessa. She gestured forward, and they followed her. The Sharkers traveled another hundred yards through the woods.

"Down!" hissed Sharessa. As one, the Sharkers dropped into crouches. They had all heard the rushing sound ahead. Before them was a small clearing through which the last breath of twilight floated to the forest floor. Sharessa could make out three or four figures on the other side.

"Shar?" It was Rings's voice.

"Here," replied Sharessa, standing. The others followed her into

the clearing.

"We heard it, too," said Rings. The faces of the two Mar sailors with him were dark above their striped, sleeveless shirts. "One of the crew was over here."

"Elsger," said one of the sailors. "Elsger!" he called.

"Shh! Don't move." Shar's heart leaped at Belmer's sudden voice. The man was supernaturally quiet until he spoke. His skin was not as dark as that of the Mar, those who descended from the original inhabitants of the region. But with his delicate olive complexion he could blend into the darkness much more naturally than any of the human Sharkers, whose fair skin marked them as children of the Ffolk, the settlers who now ruled the Five Kingdoms.

Belmer bent low and began pacing the edge of the clearing, staring intently at the ground. Surprisingly, Belgin joined him, pausing now and then to peer at a broken stem or torn leaf. The tracking continued in silence for some minutes. Belmer began the circuit a second time, frowning as he passed close to Sharessa. The moon-faced Sharper was less patient.

"I can't see where they go!" shouted Belgin. "The tracks come in, but they don't..."

Sharessa saw three perfectly round spots appear on Belmer's face. The man moved so quickly that he seemed to vanish and reappear two paces back, crouched. His sword materialized at the end of his extended arm, pointing up at the darkening branches. No human sound was uttered, but something like the breeze rustled the leaves above. A breath later, the Sharkers drew their weapons, all eyes following the direction of Belmer's slim blade. Sharessa felt as if she were moving in deep water, so slow were her limbs. Then she saw it.

Bloody remains hung heavily in the boughs above. They would have resembled the offal of a slaughterhouse, save for their incongruous location. Blood pattered down like the first kiss of rain. The Sharkers stared for long seconds.

Brindra pointed to a scrap of blood-sodden cloth dangling from the mess. It was a remnant of the striped shirt of the missing sailor.

"Found him," said Anvil.

Chapter Three

Closing the Net

"Backs to center," commanded Belmer. His voice was quiet but clear. "Belgin, Ingrar, eyes up. The rest of you, watch the forest." The Sharkers obeyed without hesitation.

"Stay," he said. Then he slipped away from the clearing. Sharessa watched him disappear. She couldn't hear his passage over the gentle susurrus of the wind in the trees. The last of the twilight had died, and the moon had not risen high enough to compensate. She turned her eyes to the task of watching for the approach of... she didn't know what. Whatever had eviscerated the sailor so quickly and silently.

"I don't see anything," whispered Belgin. "It's gone."

"The branches are moving!" said Ingrar. His voice cracked, and he bumped into Belgin as he stepped back.

"It's only the wind," said Anvil. "Keep watching."

They were silent for painful seconds. Sharessa wanted Belmer to return, but he did not. The minutes devoured the seconds. Sharessa heard them screaming in her mind.

"It's gone," said Brindra. "Whatever it was, it's gone." Shar could hear the uncertain hope in the big woman's voice. She knew that Brindra didn't really believe that the thing was gone.

"Let's go back to shore," suggested Ingrar. "We can see anything coming out of the forest from there."

"Yes," agreed Brindra fervently. "Let's get out of these woods."

"Right," agreed Anvil's rumble and Ingrar's tremulous voice. Rings began to nod but stopped after the first electrum jingle of his earand noserings.

"No," said Shar. "Belmer said to stay. We wait."

"To hell with Belm-" snapped Brindra. She cut herself off and grimaced into the black woods. "We need light."

"We'll wait a few more minutes," said Shar in compromise. "If he's not back, then we'll go back to the shore."

Brindra didn't respond, but Anvil grunted an affirmative for himself and the others. They waited, staring into the growing darkness with eyes wide to catch the faintest movement. Echoes of starlight floated down through the leaves, and the faint kiss of the moon glimmered on the high clouds. Sharessa strained to gather every faint of light with her dark eyes, but all she could see were vague gray shapes.

As the long moments passed in a funereal march, even Sharessa began to wonder whether Belmer had abandoned them. Then she tensed to strike at a figure that appeared before her. A split second and she realized it was only a shadow cast by the man who stood just within the moonlight. Her body hard coiled before her mind comprehended what she had seen. Belmer's hand was already on her sword arm. He was inhumanly fast. Sharessa was too relieved to be annoyed.

"Nothing," Belmer said. "I couldn't tell which way it went. It must have fled through the tree-tops."

"I don't think this thing flees from anything," suggested Belgin. Sharessa imagined him stroking his pale chin, though she could no longer make out his face in the darkness.

"Back to shore," said Belmer. This time it was the Sharkers who moved with uncanny speed. "Stay together," he added.

They hurried back toward the forest's edge, but it was too late. Three lanterns bobbed in the darkness.

"Cover those lights!" called Belmer.

"What?" called Turbalt. Sharessa heard Belmer's intake of breath as he prepared to shout, but it was too late. One of the lights suddenly leaped up toward the dark boughs.

Then the screams began.

Sharessa saw the lantern that had risen into the branches whirl so quickly in a circle that her persistence of vision created a floating ring of golden light in the darkness. Then the ring disintegrated into a dangling light again, jerking up and down briefly before falling with a tinkling crash. A weak, guttering fire spread where the lantern shattered.

The entire spectacle lasted no longer than three seconds. The crewmen below the ring had not moved, but the Sharkers had already spread out and stalked forward quickly and quietly.

"Jan! Jan!" cried one of the sailors below. Sharessa supposed that was the name of the missing sailor. She never had learned all their names, despite days at sea with them. Though they were Mar rather than Ffolk, the division between the castes broke down at sea, but even that took more time than the Sharkers had spent with the men of the Morning Bird.

Sharessa listened carefully for Belmer's commands, but her eyes were on the trees above the panicked sailors. All she could hear were their babbling cries for help or light or "Jan!" as they began to flee or draw their swords.

Sharessa saw nothing in the darkness above them, so she looked among the sailors as she came closer to them. One of the remaining

lanterns had vanished, while the other danced frantically among the paralyzed or confused men who stood their ground. Turbalt's high-pitched wail made an almost visible wake as the shipless captain once more proved his mettle before his crew. He was halfway back toward the shore.

The dancing lantern suddenly stopped, and Sharessa saw Anvil's huge form looming over the small sailor whose wrist he had grasped. In his other hand, the big man gripped his cutlass. Taking the lantern from the frightened sailor, Anvil raised it high, pointing his sword out beside the light. He scanned the branches above as the sailor stepped away, putting his back against a tree and drawing his own weapon.

Rings and Brindra emerged from the darkness. The dwarf clutched his axe in both hands. His mouth was a thin black line, but his eyes sparkled in the lamplight as they darted from shadow to shadow, seeking whatever had snatched up the sailor. Brindra stayed near Rings's side, covering him with her own keen blade.

The others were nowhere to be seen, so Sharessa crept up to the edge of the lantern light but did not yet enter. She kept her eyes on the trees above and strained to see through the darkness.

"Quiet!" called Belmer from the shadows on the other side of the lamplight. He was obeyed.

Sharessa heard the gentle shaking of the leaves, the panting of the sailors. The rest of the world held its breath, and then she heard a wet tearing sound in the trees above Anvil's lantern. She started to cry out to him, but it was too late. A dark, ragged mass fell upon him with a sickening smack.

Anvil shouted in surprise and fear, but he held onto the lantern. Even as she darted forward, Shar knew she was too late to help. She watched as Anvil thrashed against his flailing attacker, trying to free his cutlass from the entangling limbs without dropping the lantern.

Shar was still ten steps away when the silhouette of a long, thin blade pierced the attacker's odd, barely human body. It vanished and appeared again, this time at another angle. The weird figure fell to the ground before Sharessa had closed.

By the time she reached them, Sharessa saw Anvil's bloody figure crouched protectively around the lantern. The light spilled out to show Belmer, standing beside Anvil with his rapier and dagger poised to strike again, his own hands and face spattered with gore. They all looked down at the creature.

At first they couldn't tell what it was. Slick, gory flesh glistened in the yellow lamplight. Flaccid tentacles emerged from its torso, and... no, those weren't tentacles at all. The dead figure had been savaged beyond recognition.

They stared at the ruined body of another sailor.

"How could it do... that to him?" asked Ingrar in disbelief. "And so fast!" The Sharkers and the surviving sailors from the Morning Bird crouched on the sand around the two remaining lanterns. Turbalt hadn't spoken since Anvil and Ingrar caught up with him near the shore. Even the eight remaining sailors ignored Turbalt now, looking to Belmer and the Sharkers for direction.

"I don't know," said Sharessa. "I don't know."

"It's a fiend," offered one of the sailors. "Definitely a fiend. Definitely."

"No argument about that," said Rings. "Let's just hope it's had its fill."

"Definitely a fiend," continued the babbling sailor.

"They don't get full," said Belgin. "They don't hunt to feed. They kill because they like it. It's what they're made for."

"How do you know?" asked Brindra. "How does anyone know what a fiend wants?"

"Definitely. Definitely a fiend."

"Somebody shut him up," grumbled Rings and Brindra together. Sharessa almost smiled at their chorus, but the amusement drowned in the rising fear that had surrounded them.

"You're right," said Belgin. "No one really knows what they want. We just hear about what they do."

"It's gone now," said Belmer, across the lanterns. "But if what you say is true, we can't just stay here and wait for it to return."

"We can't go deeper into the forest," said Ingrar. "It can pick us off one at a time in there."

"We can't stay here," returned Belmer. "There could be more of them, too. The longer we wait here, the greater the chance they'll gather and find us."

"Good point," said Anvil. Sharessa nodded. She knew she didn't want to be outside anywhere in Doegan. The stories she had heard convinced her that there were more fiends than ever in these lands.

"Let's at least wait until dawn," said a sailor.

"Aye," agreed one of his mates. "The thing didn't attack until night."

Sharessa turned to see what Belmer's answer would be. He didn't speak at first, only reaching up to stroke his chin. Across the lanterns, Belgin was making exactly the same gesture. Despite the nearly tangible fear among the Sharkers and the sailors, a few smiles appeared, yellow crescents on the shadowed faces.

Belgin mocked his own signature gesture by turning left and touching his chin with his right hand, exaggerating his nervous expression. Then he turned right and took his chin in his left hand, adding a fair imitation of Belmer's serious expression. Rings chuckled,

and a nervous laughter eddied around the group for a moment. Even Belmer smiled briefly.

The laughter died after a moment. In the silence, all eyes rested on Belmer. His serious, commanding expression had returned.

"We'll wait until dawn," he announced. A few of the sailor's heads bobbed in eager agreement, and Sharessa heard Ingrains sigh of relief beside her.

"First we close these lanterns," continued Belmer. "Then well move about a mile along..."

A low moaning interrupted Belmer's orders. Sharessa looked around to see which of the sailors had made the sound, but then it came again. It was from the trees.

"Close the lanterns!" hissed Belmer. "Spread out. When we move, it's north along the beach."

Everyone obeyed, except Turbalt. The captain of The Morning Bird knelt in the sand, clutching one of the lanterns. "No," he said in his quavering voice. No no no no no no..."

Belmer lashed out, quick as a cobra, slapping the bubbling Turbalt hard across the face. As the man's hands released the lantern, Belmer hooked it with one toe and kicked it away, toward the forest. Turbalt fell to the sand, his arms raised to ward off more blows. None came, as Belmer whipped away to join the line of Sharkers and sailors who stood matching the lantern and the forest.

The beach was bone pale in the moonlight. From the black tree line came the moaning. It grew louder as the lantern tumbled across the sand, miraculously, the lamp did not break. It lay tilted against a stone near the forest's edge, casting its yellow light against the nearest trees, and then upon what emerged from them.

Ghosts, thought Sharessa. The first looked like one of the great bloated dead of the sea. Huge and pale, with thick wallows of fat rolling down from its hairless head, it shambled toward the light. More emerged from behind it, their skin twisted and grotesque as if ravaged by disease. On some Sharessa could see patches of bone where the flesh had flowed away like lava from a dying volcano. In other places the flesh had run together and hardened in ugly knots.

From their hands twitched long, hard claws. Shadows spidered across their naked skin, and the lamplight trembled at their approach. Where their feet fell, twigs cracked and stones groaned. All the while, the monsters moaned in discontent, wiggling their long, clawed fingers.

Three, Sharessa counted, then five, then eight, and more kept coming. With them came a ghastly wind. Sharessa couldn't feel it on her face, but it blew through her bones, leaving them brittle and fragile. She had seen the restless dead clack across her ship's deck on

bony feet, and with Belmer and the other Sharkers she had fought them. Even the grave could not ooze this fearsome atmosphere. These were horrors from a farther shore, blown into the world by the icy breath of hell.

Sharessa wanted to look for Belmer, but she couldn't take her eyes away, lest upon turning back she find one of the fiends standing beside her, reaching out with those hard, sharp fingers.

"Go!" hissed Belmer.

Turbalt shrieked, and Shar looked to see him kneeling on the sand, alone. His men had already heeded Belmer's order or their own terror. They ran with frightened speed, the Sharkers not far behind. "Go!" repeated Belmer. "Now!" Shar paused for less than a second, then spun on her heel and ran north, leaving the blubbling Turbalt behind. Anvil ran before her, purposefully slow to let Sharessa and Belmer catch up. Sharessa could feel Belmer beside her, but all she could hear was the pulse of blood in her ears.

Turbalt screamed louder than ever, and Shar turned back, slowing to a jog.

The shuffling fiends had reached the lamp. A few milled around it, muttering in confusion or fascination. The rest shambled past, toward the sound of Turbalt's panic. The ship captain screamed, stumbling backward toward the surf despite the wide escape route to the north.

"Damn!" cursed Anvil, glancing over his shoulder. He slowed his pace.

"Keep going," said Belmer. His voice was calm and even, despite his own running.

Anvil said nothing. He turned and ran back toward Turbalt.

Sharessa stopped running. She wanted nothing more than to get away from the things that had come out of the forest, but she couldn't leave Anvil alone to face them. Belmer stopped a few yards farther on, apparently interested enough in Anvil's fate to watch, if not to run back to help him. Two of the things had almost reached Turbalt, and more emerged from the forest. There were dozens of them, and Turbalt stared and screamed as he walked stiffly backward. His terrified wailing rose above both the rolling surf and the low, anxious moaning of the creatures. He backed into the water and fell with a splash. Pale claws reached for him.

Anvil's blade seemed to pass through the flabby monster that towered over Turbalt. The ship captain cried out as if he had been struck, but the fiend only stared at Anvil. Then a thick, black line of ichor formed in the sword's path, and the fiend's head and shoulder slid from its body, into the surf.

The big man did not hesitate. He slashed at the second in a slow,

two-handed attack that any opponent should have avoided. The fiend's eyes rolled left as its black guts spilled into the water, followed by the rest of the deformed monster's body. By now, a half-dozen fiends were closing with Anvil. Instead of attacking, he grabbed the screaming Turbalt by the shirtfront and pulled him out of the water.

Terrified beyond reason, Turbalt flailed and twisted in Anvil's grasp. His violent thrashing slowed Anvil as the Sharker staggered out of the surf. The fiends were slow, but Turbalt would doom them both in his panic. Sharessa could wait no longer. She ran forward, despite Belmer's order.

Before Sharessa could reach him, Anvil had lost his patience with the struggling Turbalt. With the bell guard of his sabre, he struck the man hard in the belly. Sharessa could hear the whoosh of air from Turbalt's lungs, and all the fight left him. Anvil hefted the limp form onto his shoulder and began to run.

Sharessa fell in beside him to fend off any fiends who proved faster than the others. She was surprised to see Belmer on Anvil's other side, doing the same. His face was grim, and Sharessa feared for Anvil after their escape.

Soon they had outdistanced the fiends. The moon had risen higher, and its reflection in the sea cast blanching light all the way to the forest's edge. The Sharkers and the sailors of the Morning Bird had stopped less than a half mile along the shore. Before reaching the group, Belmer raised a hand, signaling Anvil and Sharessa to stop. Anvil shrugged Turbalt off his shoulders, and the smaller man grunted as he hit the sand. He kept his gaze down, hiding his face from the others. In a second he scrambled up and walked quickly away, toward the larger group, indignant or ashamed.

Belmer ignored the ship captain and turned to Anvil. Sharessa braced herself to defend her comrade with an argument.

"Very impressive," said Belmer. Sharessa saw the surprise on Anvil's face and imagined it looked much the same as hers. Perhaps Belmer had come around. He began walking after Turbalt. Anvil and Sharessa followed. Belmer put a friendly hand on Anvil's big arm.

"Disobey me again, and it won't be the fiends that kill you." His voice was anything but friendly.

"Here they come," announced Brindra. "Dozens of them. Hundreds, maybe." The heavy woman was almost out of breath. Running was not easy for her, though she could fight as long and hard as any of the Sharkers.

"How far?" asked Belmer. The others crowded around to hear the news.

"A little over a mile," she answered. "Probably not much less than that now. The things are damned slow."

"Lucky for us," said Belgin Dree with some irony.

"The ones behind us are closer," said one of the Morning Bird sailors. "There's more of them, too."

"They're herding us," said Ingrar. He had been a shepherd before leaving the Web mountains to find his fortune. While he still had much to learn about sailing and pirating, Sharessa supposed he knew plenty about herding. She didn't like the thought that this time they were the sheep.

Sharessa suddenly wished Ingrar had stayed at his home, never to join the Sharkers or find himself stalked by fiends in the wilds of Doegan. She looked at his face. He looked older in the moonlight, and some of his fear had left. The Sharkers had learned to depend on his courage in a fray, but something about the fiends in the woods unnerved him. If the truth were told, Sharessa thought, the fiends unnerved them all. Impulsively, she leaned toward him and brushed his cheek with her lips. He straightened his shoulders and gave her a half-smile. She turned and found herself staring into Belmer's cold eyes.

"Herding us is right," said Rings. "But where?"

"Into the woods," said Belmer, still holding Sharessa in his gaze. The dark-tressed pirate knew he was right.

"But why?" asked Ingrar. Sharessa thought she knew the answer to this, too.

"You saw how slow those things are," she said. "Whatever killed Elsgar and Jan is wickedly fast. Maybe it controls the slow ones. Maybe it sent them out to push us back in."

"And maybe that one can't leave the woods," suggested Ingrar, hopefully.

"I don't think so," said Belmer. "I think it wants to play."

"What?" said Brindra.

"It could have killed more of us," said Belgin. "Plenty more." He had taken a pair of dice from his vest pocket and was rolling them around in his palm. Each revolution made another tiny click.

Belmer nodded. "It doesn't just want to kill us."

"It wants to terrify us," finished Belgin. Click. Click.

"What do we do?" said Ingrar. His voice was calmer than Sharessa would have expected, but not resigned.

"We could take our chances in the woods," offered Sharessa. "If we stay together, it can't get us all. If we don't carry a lantern and.." Everyone was looking at her as if she were insane. Even Belgin's dice-clicking had stopped.

"Never mind."

"We can't fight our way through the melty ones," said Ingrar.

"Mm," agreed Rings. "Too many."

"We could swim around a group of the slow ones," suggested Brindra. Sharessa almost groaned at that idea. The Sharkers had spent far too much of their time swimming away from burning or sinking ships. Still, the fiends might not follow them there, and they could all swim faster than those lumbering, half-melted fiends.

Belmer nodded at Brindra's suggestion. "We could go deep enough that the slow fiends couldn't wade out after us."

"Uh," rasped Anvil. His voice was raspier than usual. "I didn't say anything earlier, since we were close to shore and didn't really have a choice, but —"

"Let me guess," said Belmer. "There are fiends in the waters of Doegan, too."

Anvil just nodded. "Gigantic ones."

"Joy."

"I didn't put them there," grumbled Anvil.

"Well, you were right about fiends in the woods," said Belmer. "I'll take your word on the ones in the water."

"So what do we do?" asked Ingrar. They all looked at Belmer, and he turned to look back at the woods.

"Oh, no," said Brindra-and Ingrar, and about half of the sailors. "Oh, yes."

They crept into the forest slowly, Belmer and Sharessa in the lead. The others followed as reluctantly as skinny-dippers in winter, but the forest was warm and still. The farther they moved away from the sea breeze, the warmer it grew. Sharessa felt her clothes beginning to cling to her damp flesh. She loosened the strings of her shirt and shook the fabric briskly.

With the heat came renewed fear, and the Mar sailors became clumsy in the stifling darkness.

"Ow!"

"Watch where ye're going." "I can't see a—" "Shh!"

"Slowly," said Belmer. "And quietly."

They moved along, trying to obey. Even Turbalt was uncharacteristically quiet. The shipless captain hadn't said a word since Anvil had saved him from his own cowardice.

Sharessa felt Belmer's hand upon her arm. It was cool and dry in the moist heat of the forest. His whisper was so quiet that she had to strain to hear it.

"Stay," he said. Then he was gone, and Sharessa waited until the sailor behind her came close before putting her hand on his arm and a whisper in his ear. He did the same, and so on down the line with one or two startled yelps. Then Belmer returned and led Sharessa to a new path in the darkness. They continued this way for more than an hour, stopping four more times, more quietly than before.

Finally, when Belmer returned from the darkness, they gathered close to talk again.

"Over the hills to the city, right?"

"Right," whispered one of the sailors.

"That's right," said Anvil. Though he had spent most of his adult life at sea, the big pirate had been born in Doegan.

"There's a river canyon in the way," pointed out Belmer. "About fifty yards north."

"Shouldn't be," said one of the sailors uncertainly. Sharessa imagined a withering stare from Belmer, but she couldn't even see the glimmer of his eyes in the darkness. The heavy canopy of trees obscured all the moonlight here.

"There was a footbridge, once," said Anvil. "I think."

"Right," sighed Belmer. "I don't suppose anyone remembers where that is."

"It was a long time ago," said Anvil. "I think it's farther inland, but I'm not sure." None of the sailors had anything to say.

"Good. It'll be an adventure." Belmer's voice was more sarcastic than Shar had ever heard it. Unlike the others, who seemed tense and frightened by the fiends, Belmer seemed increasingly annoyed.

"We'll move along the ravine's edge," he decided. "We'll travel inland and take the first crossing we can manage."

They formed their snaking line again and followed Belmer through the darkness.

Chapter Four

Blood Begets Blood

Sharessa heard the water before they reached the canyon's edge. Judging by the sound, she guessed it was deep and wide. As they emerged from the darkness of the woods, she saw that where the river split the forest, moonlight shone down onto the water far below. The ravine was deeper than she had imagined. The moonlight slanted sixty feet or more before glancing off the river's face. On either side of the water were ragged cliffs. Some shadowy places on the far wall looked climbable, with ropes and pitons-in daylight. Even then the ascent would be dangerous, as the river's slow teeth gnawed at the earth to either side, undermining the ravine walls.

Sharessa crouched and gazed across the open space. The far shore was at least thirty yards away, probably more. It was hard to judge the distance across when the drop was so daunting. Thick tufts of grass and forest weeds jutted over the cliff's edge, each one poised like a suicidal lover, ready to plunge into the abyss. They wouldn't be crossing the river here.

They resumed their march. The moonlight emboldened them, and they quickened their pace. Still, every few minutes, Belmer would stop them with a raised hand, and they would all crouch and listen to the sounds of the forest. It was harder to make out any noise other than the river water. The ravine's walls were like cupped hands around a giant's mouth, magnifying even a gurgle to a roar.

When they had traveled for another hour, Sharessa dared to hope they had escaped their hidden tormentor. Maybe Ingrar had been right, and the creature couldn't leave the woods. Maybe they were safe out here in the moonlight. Sharessa made a silent prayer that it was so.

No sooner was the prayer conceived in her mind than she heard a splash behind and below her. One of the men behind her gave an urgent whisper. It came again, louder. Then she could make it out.

"Garni! He just jumped!" Sharessa didn't remember which sailor was Garni. She thought madly for a second that she should learn the names of the other sailors, as if that might ward them from danger.

Hurrying back toward the commotion, Sharessa saw the sailor's dark figure in the moonlight. He stood near the edge of the cliff, staring down at the water far below.

"I can't believe it. He just walked right over the edge. He had to

have seen."

Before Sharessa could open her mouth, spindly arms reached out from the inky blackness behind the sailor. As she drew her breath to shout, thin claws closed on the man's arms. "Look out!" she cried as those arms withdrew. Before she could close the distance, the echoes of his screams were already returning from the chasm behind her.

This time the sailors responded to the attack by crouching and falling silent-except for Turbalt. He crashed into the sailor in front of him, running away from where Gami and the other sailor-was his name Haj? — had vanished. Someone near Turbalt grabbed him and pulled him to the ground.

"Let me-" Turbalt's voice was smothered. Whoever grabbed him had the sense to put a hand over his mouth.

Sharessa spared a glance over the ravine's edge. Silver ribbons of light danced across the river, but there was nothing else to see. She snapped her attention back toward the forest. She could almost feel her pupils widening as she gazed into the gloom, but she saw nothing.

"It's gone. Go, go!" came Belmer's whisper from beside her. He moved past her, into the darkness. Sharessa obeyed him, taking the lead by herself.

She slipped quietly as a cat through the half-light of the forest's edge, careful to avoid the uncertain boundary of the ravine. She paused to listen for the sound of the others following. Satisfied that they were moving again, she increased her pace. This time she drew her slim cutlass from its scabbard.

No sooner did she have it before her than she heard a rustling in the trees beside her.

Sharessa threw herself down, rolling on her shoulder. Something heavy whipped past her head, and all the flesh on her neck contracted. She came up in a crouch, her sword before her. She could see nothing, but a faint smell of sulfur lingered in the air.

"It's here!" she cried in warning. But it was too late. The fiend was already among the men behind her.

An ululating scream pierced Sharessa's ears. It sounded completely inhuman, but Sharessa knew it had to be from another of the sailors. Blades flashed, and dark figures converged on the spot from whence the scream had come. Sharker and sailor alike were ready this time. Sharessa nearly ran into Anvil and Brindra where they stood with four of the sailors, forming their own circle back-to-back. Whatever had been there was now gone, and so was another crewman from the Morning Bird.

Farther back from the ravine, another man shouted in surprise. Ingrar's voice cried, "Here! It's here!"

"Follow me," said Sharessa, already running. She dashed toward

Ingrar's voice, into the trees. She had almost reached him when she heard the boy's grunt of exertion, then a clunk of sword on wood.

"Where is it?" he raged. Among the vague silhouettes of tree branches, Sharessa saw Ingrar's black figure slashing blindly. She slowed lest she run into his hacking sword. Then she saw one of the branches unfold like the joints of an insect. It lashed down at Ingrar's head.

The boy screamed, clutching his face. "My eyes! My eyes!"

Sharessa stabbed at the attacking limb. Her sword struck nothing at first, then branches, then nothing again. Then her blade struck something tough and yielding. She struck again. Her sword hit hard, but the blade did not bite. A rough, dry claw gripped her wrist and held it fast.

A blast of foul breath struck Sharessa in the face. She struggled to free her arm, but the fiendish hand bound her fast as steel. It twisted her wrist so hard that she gasped and dropped the sword.

She struck out with her other fist, but a bony manacle clasped that one too. Belmer appeared beside her, his long blade thrusting at the thing that held her.

"Damn!" he cursed, stabbing again and again. "I can't pierce its hide." He slashed and thrust, and each time his blade turned away.

All the while, the powerful claws squeezed Sharessa's wrists harder. Her mouth opened to scream, and she felt a hot spray of blood upon her face. The manacles opened.

"Ha!" cried Brindra from Sharessa's side. She struck again above Sharessa's head, but the thing was already moving. More ichor rained down on Sharessa's face. The rotten stench of it made her retch.

"I hurt it!" cried Brindra gleefully.

"Kill it!" shouted Belmer. Together, they followed the sound of the fiend's escape. After a few steps, they stopped to listen again. The trees rustled to their left.

"Where?" cried Anvil.

"Between here and the river," shouted Belmer. "Open the lantern!"

The trees shook again, this time to the north. Sharessa reached for her fallen sword, groping in the darkness. Her trembling hands found roots, weeds, then bare ground. Finally they touched her cutlass. She held it up again at the trees, feeling only slightly safer.

Light spilled out near the edge of the ravine.

Anvil held the lantern high, looking up into the trees. Beside him, two sailors crouched with their cutlasses ready, frightened but ready to defend themselves. Brindra rushed to stand by Anvil, her face illuminated more by her excitement than by the yellow lamplight.

The others remained in darkness, though Sharessa thought she saw Rings's short, stocky shadow near the edge of the light before it

faded back into the darkness. She wondered where Belmer had gone. The fiend couldn't have killed him. Could it?

"It's still here," said Brindra, panting. "I can feel it." She grimaced up at the trees. Every time Anvil shifted the lantern, the boughs seemed to move.

"Hold that light still," snapped Brindra. Her eyes sought out the slightest movement. Dark crimson ichor oozed across the surface of her blade.

Sharessa usually felt safer in the shadows, but not now. She crept toward the circle of light to join the others. Once there, with her back against Brindra's, she counted heads.

All of the Sharkers were present, as were three sailors. Turbalt had shoved his way into the middle of the circle they formed, pressed against the ground below Anvil's huge form. He sobbed quietly, alternately hiding his face and glancing around like a cornered hare.

"It's no good," said Belmer, reappearing suddenly at the edge of the circle. "The thing won't fight when we're ready. Let's move."

"Let's wait until Ingrar's ready," she said. She looked at Belmer to see whether he would overrule her. He returned her gaze, paused for only a second, then nodded.

The young pirate clutched his bleeding face with both hands as if trying to press his eyes back into his head. After his initial shock, he had regained his calm, despite the grievous wound.

One of the older sailors stood near the young Sharker. The grizzled sea dog took off his shirt to reveal an expanse of gray hair on a tanned chest. Without a word, he tore the cloth into long strips, fashioning a bandage for Ingrar's eyes.

Sharessa smiled her thanks to the old sailor, taking the bandages.

"I can't see," Ingrar told her plainly. "My eyes are burning."

"You'll be all right," she said. "Once we're in Eldrinpar, we'll find a healer. Take your hands away." When he did, she dabbed at his bloody face with the bandages. Then she saw that he might need more than just healing. A deep scratch crossed both eyes and the bridge of his nose. One eyelid hung limply, almost completely cut away. Sharessa tried to bind his eyes, but she hadn't the skill. The old sailor took over.

"I feel sleepy," said Ingrar.

"Anvil will help you," Sharessa said. The big man nodded at her, passing his lantern to Belgin. He sheathed his sword and lifted Ingrar in his arms. The boy's head lolled against Anvil's shoulder. Shar's face must have betrayed her alarm.

"He's asleep," said Anvil. "I can feel him breathing."

Sharessa nodded, then turned toward the light. A trio of moths circled the lantern in Belgin's raised hand.

"Let's move," said Belmer. "While we're all still breathing"

They walked for another two hours. After the first mile or so, the tree line drew away from the ravine's edge. The ground between the forest and the ravine was covered with wild grasses, relatively level except for a jutting stone here and there. There were fewer places to hide, and the Sharkers slowed a little, feeling safer with some distance between them and the obscuring forest.

Belmer called for a halt, and Sharessa organized a quick watch. She set Anvil and three of the Morning Bird's sailors around their temporary camp. She chose each site herself, making sure that each had a clear line of sight to the woods. Then she returned to the light of their brief camp.

"It's a kind of paralytic, I think," said Belgin as Sharessa rejoined them. Across Ingrar's sleeping body, Belmer nodded his agreement.

"At least the poison won't kill us," said Belmer. He laid a slim hand on Ingrar's temple, smoothing the bandage. He looked up to see that the others were watching him and removed his hand quickly. "But that doesn't make the thing any less dangerous."

"If it would just stand and fight," grumbled Brindra. She sat with her sword across her knees, wiping the blade with a dirty cloth. The fiend's blood had come off long ago, but the stench of spoiled meat and rotten eggs remained. She kept polishing the metal in a vain attempt to banish the stink.

"Where did you find that sword?" asked Belmer.

"What's that to you?" responded Brindra. She remained surly around the outlander, still deeply resentful of Kurthe's death.

If Belmer took offense at the barrel-shaped woman's tone, he didn't show it. "You cut the fiend, while its hide turned away my blade and Sharessa's."

"Maybe you just missed," snarled Brindra.

"No, he's right," said Rings. He bent down on one knee beside Brindra. Their heads were at the same height, now. "I've never seen you sharpen this blade."

"Never needed it." Brindra shrugged, but she looked at the sword more intently.

"She took it from an Ulgarthan buccaneer," explained Rings.

"So it might be enchanted," concluded Belmer. "Anyone else have a magical weapon?"

Rings held up one of his axes, a dwarven weapon with a curving blade. "It's an everbright," explained Rings. "I don't know whether it can hurt that fiend, but it has the magic of the smith within its steel."

"What about yours, Belmer? Enchanted?" asked Belgin. Sharessa

wanted to know, too. If Belmer wielded an enchanted weapon, that would explain his uncanny prowess with the sword. Many were the tales of quickblades, weapons enchanted with the speed of lightning.

"Never used one," said Belmer. "Too easy to detect. Not worth the risk."

Belgin nodded as if he understood, and Brindra looked at Belmer with scorn.

"You mean if the fiend attacks again, these two are the only ones that can hurt it?" Turbalt's voice seemed strange after such a long silence. His plaintive whine had not been missed.

"Perhaps," said Belmer. "We might be able to burn it. The thing found us even without our light, so there's no reason we shouldn't carry torches."

"That way we can at least see what we're fighting," said Brindra. She stood up and sheathed her blade.

"You and Rings must be ready to attack as soon as the thing appears again," said Sharessa.

"It may come after you, Brindra," said Belmer. "After all, you're the only one to hurt it so far." Sharessa thought for a moment that the outlander smiled faintly at the thought.

"That's all right with me," said the big woman. "I'm ready to finish the job for what it did to Ingrar."

Sharessa half-expected Belmer to say that they must leave Ingrar behind, but he just looked down at the young, blinded Sharker. Either Belmer realized that the others would rebel at such a suggestion, or he was beginning to value their lives more highly.

"We've rested long enough. Let's make those torches and keep looking for Anvil's bridge."

Sharessa was the first to spot it. She said nothing at first, afraid that the shadows were playing tricks with her eyes. But the shadows had always been friends to her, and as they drew closer, she saw that her first impression had been right.

There it is," she said, pointing. A slender bridge arched across the ravine ahead. Below, the waters roared as the river narrowed. White spumes glinted in the moonlight, far below.

"Strange place for a bridge," said Belgin as they came closer. Indeed, there was no discernable path on this side, yet the bridge itself looked well tended.

"Weird looking, too," said Rings. He was right, thought Sharessa. The bridge looked as smooth as alabaster in the moonlight, thin and delicate where it arched over the ravine. At either side stood ornate archways of spiky, twisting designs that reminded Sharessa of no culture she had ever seen.

"Wait," said Belmer. "I don't like this." He paused in thought a moment, then said, "It's a trap. We go around it."

"Don't be a fool," cried Turbalt. Sharessa wished that the stupid little man would keep his mouth shut. "It's our only way of getting away from this... this thing."

"Then you cross first," said Belmer icily. Without waiting for Turbalt's reply, he waved the party on. Everyone followed, including Turbalt after a sputtering pause.

"Not that I don't trust you," said Rings. "But what makes you think that bridge is a trap?"

"You saw it. No man ever designed that bridge," Belmer replied. "It was more a fiend's idea of a bridge."

"Illusion?"

"I'm sure of it. The fiend must know we're expecting a bridge, so it made one for us. It'll probably ambush us as we start to cross."

"There is a bridge around here, somewhere," said Anvil. "But I agree, that's not it."

"So glad to have your approval," said Belmer. Sharessa thought there was more humor than threat in the man's voice this time, but Anvil shut up.

"Well walk up to the bridge, as if we were going to cross it. When I give the signal, run past," said Belmer. "Rings and Brindra, you guard the rear." Sharessa heard the jingle of Ring's nod and Brindra's indifferent grunt.

They walked toward the strange bridge, not so slowly that they looked suspicious, but not so fast that they couldn't retreat. As they came within ten yards of the queer archway, Sharessa watched for a sign from Belmer. When they had almost reached the bridge, his sword appeared in one hand, and he snapped, "Run!"

They sprinted like athletes on a track, heads low but faces forward, their weapons gripped tightly as batons. Rings and Brindra hung back, but not by far. Belmer lingered behind with Anvil, who still carried Ingrar's unconscious body.

Sharessa ran until her lungs burned. What strength she had kept after the Morning Bird sank had melted with the heat. Beside her, Turbalt puffed loudly. The little man could run much faster than she had expected.

"Look," called Belmer. They all slowed, then stopped. Sharessa turned to see Belmer pointing back toward the bridge. Its pale form melted away to show an empty space between the ravine's sides.

"Still want to cross there?" Sharessa asked Turbalt. The fat man gave her a black look before returning his gaze to the ground.

They regrouped, anxious to move away from the failed ambush.

"The fiend is getting clumsy," said Belmer. They walked close

together again, ringed in lamp- and torchlight.

"No," corrected Belmer. "It's learning. It won't make the same mistake again."

"You sound as if you admire the thing," said Sharessa.

"What's not to admire?" said Belmer. "Imagine an army of them, if you could control them."

"Aye, but that's the problem, isn't it?" Rings walked with his enchanted axe ready.

"It's that sort of thinking that brought them here in the first place," said Sharessa. "If it weren't for the bloodforges, there wouldn't be any fiends in Doegan."

"Bloodforges?" asked Belmer.

"They are what give the rulers of the Five Kingdoms their power," said Sharessa. "Great magical artifacts that create armies."

Belmer halted for a moment and stared intently at her. "Are you serious?"

"Oh, yes. If it weren't for the bloodforges, I think, Doegan would control the entire region."

"Or the Fallen Temple would," said Anvil. His voice was even more hoarse than usual, Sharessa thought. The strain of carrying Ingrar was wearing him down. "The emperor is the only thing that keeps the Temple in check."

"Emperor," chuckled Belgin derisively. "He's no greater than the others, a petty king warring for land."

"And who else will protect us from the fiends?" retorted Brindra. She and Anvil were both from Doegan. "Surely not the shepherds of Edenvale."

"Hey!" interjected Ingrar weakly. The others stopped arguing at once, all eyes on their wounded companion. He murmured some protest about the bravery of Edenvalers before Anvil made him drink some water. The wounded youth sipped a few drops and returned to sleep.

"Tell me more about this Fallen Temple," said Belmer.

"It's a corrupted order based on one of the old gods the Ffolk brought over centuries ago," said Sharessa. "People say that the Fallen Temple brings the fiends into this world."

"That's not it," said Rings. "It's the bloodforges themselves. The more the kings use them, the more fiends come."

"It is true that the bloodforges are dangerous," said Anvil slowly. "They curse whoever uses them, and all their people." He pulled open his shirt to expose his ribs to the torchlight. Paint, piscine scales covered his flesh. "Most Ffolk in Doegan bear signs similar to this. Some even are born with gills."

"Interesting," commented Belmer. He leaned forward and brushed

his fingertips lightly against the scales, then drew back.

"That's nothing," said Brindra. She fanned her fingers open to show that they were webbed up to the first knuckle. "Everyone in Eldrinpar and many who live nearby show some sign of the sea."

"The emperor of Doegan hasn't shown his face in public since before I was born," added Anvil. "They say it's because he's become like a fiend himself."

"Still, no ruler will stop using a bloodforge," said Belgin. "It's the only way to defend your kingdom when the enemy is using one. No ordinary army can stand against the creatures made by a blood-forge."

"Where does the emperor keep this bloodforge?" asked Belmer.

"Probably in the palace in Eldrinpar," said Anvil. "No one has ever seen it."

"That makes sense," nodded Belmer. "What do they look like?"

"Who knows?" said Sharessa. "But they're said to be big."

"Interesting," said Belmer again. "I can think of some in Faerun who would pay a great deal for such a thing." His eyes found the invisible distance of thought and observed it for a while. Then he nodded for Anvil to pick up Ingrar again, and they resumed their journey.

They walked a while in silence, and Sharessa wondered what Belmer was thinking. Surely he wasn't planning to steal a bloodforge for himself.

When she had said they were big, she'd meant vast, huge. She'd heard that the emperor of Doegan had built his palace around the bloodforge, though she wasn't sure that was true. Centuries-old stories spoke of thousands of Mar slaves dragging bloodforges on gigantic sledges when one had to be moved.

Still, Belmer seemed fascinated both by the fiends and by the bloodforges. Sharessa wondered just how ambitious he was. Would he abandon the job at hand for an opportunity to steal one?

It was a ridiculous thought, Sharessa knew. Even if he could manage to locate the bloodforge of Doegan, it was inconceivable that he could steal it. Just the question of transporting the thing half a world away, to Faerun—it was ludicrous!

"Wait!" hissed Belgin. He crouched beside one of the Mar sailors — Brenn was his name, thought Sharessa. Brenn held his torch high while Ingrar peered across the ground between them and the forest.

"What?" asked Belmer, after waiting a long moment.

"Nothing," said Belgin with a shrug. "Maybe just an animal."

"Let's take the fight to it," said Brindra.

"It has the advantage in the woods. If it made that sound, it may just be trying to draw us in."

Brindra didn't argue, but she looked even more unhappy, if that

were possible. Rings smacked her shoulder lightly, and they turned back to follow the ravine.

Sharessa was the next to hear the rustling, and she wasn't the only one. Every hundred feet or so, another sound came from the black trees. At first they were only rustling noises. Later came the snapping of branches.

The sounds began to work on their nerves. Brindra spun around at every noise, and Turbalt let out a pathetic squealing cry. Anvil's face grew darker in the torchlight, his eyes seeming to sink deeper into his battered face. Soon, every wooden snap was followed by a harsh curse.

"Damn it! Give me your sword, Brindra," croaked Anvil. He sounded like a man who hadn't drunk for days, though he had shared water with the rest of them not more than an hour earlier.

"Don't be a fool, Anvil," said Belmer. He moved to stand immediately in front of the big man. Beside the giant Sharker, Belmer's small stature was exaggerated. He looked like a halfling beside a man.

"That's what it wants," Belmer continued. "It's working on your mind, now." Sharessa saw Brindra standing behind the smaller man, her hand upon the hilt of her sword. Belmer had to know she was there, but his attention was on Anvil.

"Don't you think I know that?" Anvil's rough voice was a dry landslide. "I'm sick of it. I'll kill the fiend, or it'll kill me. I don't care, so long as this damnable stalking stops!"

Sharessa was sure that Belmer would strike Anvil or kill the big man himself. Even with Brindra's help, Anvil didn't stand a chance against the compact swordsman. Sharessa tried to catch Brindra's eye so she could shake her head, warn her away from the argument. But Brindra's eyes were boring a hole in the back of Belmer's head. Slowly, quietly, she drew the sword free of its scabbard.

Before Sharessa could decide whether to cry a warning-and whom to warn-Belmer surprised her by taking a different tack.

"If you die, who will carry Ingrar?" said Belmer. Anvil's eyes opened wide and dull. He hadn't been thinking of his wounded companion.

"Perhaps Sharessa and Belgin could drag him over these rocks, but only you can carry him to Eldrinpar." Belmer's voice was still cool and professional, but Sharessa was surprised to hear something other than commands or threats in the face of insubordination.

"We're beyond the bonds of your contracts, now," continued Belmer. "Not that I'm freeing you from them. But they mean less every time one of you is hurt or killed. They mean nothing if we all die here. So listen to me, not because you signed your contract, but because we

all want to get to Eldrinpar alive."

Sharessa could see by Anvil's expression that Belmer had won him over, but hatred burned even hotter in Brindra's eyes. Her sword arm trembled as she raised the blade to strike.

"I want all of us to survive," said Belmer. He didn't turn around, but Sharessa could see that he was speaking to Brindra. "It would be a shame to lose another of you so close to our goal."

Sharessa knew then that if Brindra's blade moved another inch, Belmer would kill her. The big woman's cutlass would never even touch the swordsman, and the party would leave her body for the fiend. She sought Brindra's eyes with her own, but the barrel-shaped warrior stared at the back of Belmer's head, her lips contorting in rage and uncertainty.

Then she lowered her sword and turned away. Still not looking back at her, Belmer patted Anvil on the arm as he had earlier that night, as if he were a friend.

"Let's get out of these woods."

Chapter Five

Crossing the Bridge

They crouched in the quiet darkness, listening. The breeze did little to relieve the sticky heat. Sharessa felt the snakes of her own sweat crawling under her shirt. After spending weeks aboard a ship, one didn't usually notice the smell of the other crew, even lathered after hard work or, as now, hard flight. But Sharessa smelled the others' sweat now. It had a sour, frightened tang. If the fiend had had any trouble tracking them before — and it didn't seem to have any-then it could easily sniff them out now.

Belmer had ordered them to put out the lights after they found the bridge. Now they watched it in the moonlight, looking for some sign that the fiend had gotten there first. It was hard to sit still in this nasty warmth.

In Doegan the temperature usually dropped at night, but it now seemed to grow hotter with every hour. Maybe the fiend brought something of the nine hells with it. Sharessa shuddered at the thought and tried to concentrate on spotting anything unusual about this bridge.

They were almost upon the span before they saw it. Belmer had remained with the group for the past few hours, rather than slipping off on his own to scout ahead. Sharessa couldn't decide whether he stayed to ensure Brindra didn't conspire against him or whether he was reluctant to stray too far from her magical sword.

"It looks safe," said Belgin quietly.

"Does it matter?" asked Rings sarcastically.

"I suppose not," replied Belgin in a tired but still amiable tone. "If the fiend doesn't get us, we'll bake in this heat."

"Let's go," said Belmer. "Don't set foot on the bridge yet. But get ready to cross quickly."

They rose and moved quickly to the bridge. This far from the trees, they almost didn't need torches to see. The unimpeded moonlight illuminated the full length of the arch. Its stones were bone white under the moon, and creeping vines ran like black veins across its surface. A shadow ran along one side, refreshingly crisp and black after the vague shapes of the forest. Two narrow ruts ran from the end of the bridge, leading toward the forest's edge and, no doubt, a long-overgrown path.

At the bridge, Belmer bent to scoop up a handful of stones from

the wheel-worn path. In the same motion, he scattered them across the floor of the stone span. Everyone watched as they bounced and skittered across.

"Seems real to me," remarked Anvil. He held Ingrar upright. The youth had regained enough of his senses to stand when helped, but he still couldn't walk alone.

"Good," murmured Ingrar. "I wan' sleep inna bed at the palace 'night." Sharessa was glad that he had recovered some sense of humor when he awoke, but she feared that he would never regain his sight. Worse, his slurred words suggested that his injury had affected his brain as well as his eyes.

"Rings, you take the lead," commanded Belmer. "Brindra, you bring up the rear." The dwarf nodded and started across the bridge, two sailors behind him. Anvil lifted Ingrar in his arms and followed; then came Turbalt and the two remaining sailors. Belmer and Sharessa were next, with Brindra in the rear. The big woman backed onto the bridge with her sword at guard, ready for a rush from behind.

Sharessa crept carefully toward the center of the bridge. Rings was already there, marching steadily toward the other side, axe clutched firmly in his grip. Sharessa began to hope that they would cross without incident, but then she saw the dwarf stumble. He glanced down at his feet to see what had tripped him, then struggled to free himself.

"Look out for the vines!" he cried. But it was too late. Sharessa felt strong tendrils curling about her ankles. From either side of the bridge, black vines writhed like serpents. Their leaves undulated with the grace of ocean currents, though the vines themselves moved with the alien purpose of tentacles. Without realizing she'd drawn her sword, she slashed down at the entangling vines. Her blade cut the tough plants, but more curled around her legs before she could free herself.

From across the bridge, Sharessa heard Turbalt shrieking. To be fair, she was near to shouting herself. She'd expected an attack from the fiend, not from the bridge itself.

Beside Sharessa, Belmer and Brindra struggled to cut themselves free. Belmer's keen rapier licked out to slash at the vines rising around Brindra's thick torso. With his dagger he cut away the dark vines that curled about his own thigh. Despite his speed, both he and Brindra were quickly becoming covered in leafy vines.

"Stand still, Ingrar! I'll cut you free." Anvil's hoarse roar thundered above even Turbalt's screams. Sharessa spared a glance toward the center of the bridge. While Anvil ripped at the vines that bound his big arms still, Ingrar stood dazed and uncertain. He took a few blind steps backward, nearly toppling over the edge of the bridge.

"Where is it?" shouted Ingrar. "I don't feel anything!"

Sharessa imagined she heard a crack of wind as Belmer's head snapped toward Ingrar. The boy was covered in vines, more than anyone else. They danced upon his body, serpents swaying to an invisible pipe. But Ingrar stood there as if they did not exist.

"Close your eyes!" shouted Belmer. "Ignore the vines. They aren't real!"

Sharessa closed her eyes, then opened them again when she felt the tough vines reach her

1 throat. She could feel them squeezing her, thrusting into her clothes, twining through her hair, choking the breath out of her.

A hard slap turned her head. Belmer stood before her, cloaked in living green. He didn't seem to feel the vines.

"They're not real," he said. "This is real." He struck her again. Where she felt the pain of his hand, she didn't feel the vines crawling upon his flesh. Sharessa closed her eyes again and focused on the sting of Belmer's slap. She imagined it spreading across her cheek, covering her whole face. There were no vines creeping there. She stopped struggling. The crawling, strangling sensations gave way to a faint tingling. Where she had felt the rough bonds squeezing her, there was only the warm breeze.

Sharessa took a deep breath and looked around. Anvil and three of the Morning Bird's crew still struggled in their leafy bonds, but the others stood free of the illusion. As Sharessa looked across the bridge at them, the image of her companions blurred and vanished in a glassy haze. She felt a sudden wave of cold and dizziness.

A huge wall of ice had formed out of the thin air. It solidified in the center of the bridge, cutting Sharessa, Belmer, and Brindra off from the others. Sharessa thought for a second that it was another illusion, but the wall's sudden weight tilted the bridge. Sharessa heard the scrape of stones falling from the nether side. Before she could hear their splash below, Brindra shouted in pain and alarm. Sharessa turned. The thing crouched over Brindra was man-shaped, with long, spindly limbs bent at arachnid angles. Clawed hands too large for the thing's body clamped Brindra's arms to the bridge floor. A heavy, segmented tail crooked above its back, ending in a long, cruel barb that curved back in a hook. The tail slammed down for what must have been the second or third time, and Brindra cried out again.

Sharessa saw Belmer already attacking the fiend as she lunged forward to help her friend. Then the thing looked up at her, and the moonlight revealed its face.

It shouldn't have been alive, that skull head. The flesh that bound the bones was gray-brown and bloodless, like a sculptor's unfinished foundation. Long, splintered fangs jutted where teeth should be,

forming a grotesque smile on the putty face. A pair of jagged holes were the nose, and above them flickered eyes of flame.

The fiend gazed at Sharessa. Belmer darted in at the monster's side, thrusting, then slashing when the fiend's hide turned away his sword. The monster's tail flicked invisibly fast, sweeping Belmer's legs from under him. The bridge tilted some more, its stones shifting and groaning. Sharessa faintly heard Rings's shouts from the other side of the wall of ice.

"My sword!" cried Brindra. Her voice was weak and flat with pain. Sharessa saw her release the cutlass from her pinned hand. The sword skidded across the bridge, toward the fragmenting edge and the water far below.

Sharessa started to move toward the fallen sword.

"Tak!" The fiend spat the word in mockery of a mother tsking her child. Sharessa's gaze was locked upon the fiend's burning eyes, and she stared helplessly as it released Brindra's sword arm long enough to waggle a long, thin finger at Sharessa.

The fiend rocked suddenly to the side. Belmer had thrown his entire body at it, delivering a punishing kick to the monster's side. The monster hissed like a cobra, spinning around to attack the man.

"Get the sword!" cried Belmer. The fiend seemed to understand his words and whipped around to face Sharessa, but Belmer was already on its back, his arms reaching around its neck.

Sharessa scrambled after Brindra's cutlass. The bridge rocked again under her shifting weight, and she sprawled on her stomach, arms reaching toward the weapon. The cutlass skittered just out of reach, sliding perilously close to the ruined edge of the bridge. A huge chunk of bridge fell away beside it, leaving a third of its blade hanging over empty space.

A painful blow struck Sharessa's leg. She spared a glance back to see the fiend gripping Belmer by the throat, holding the struggling man far from its body. Its barbed tail rose for another strike at Sharessa, but then it reeled back as Brindra plowed into its legs.

Sharessa pushed herself forward, certain that she would fall over the edge, but knowing she needed that sword. The hard bridge floor scraped her chest, hips, and knees as she thrust toward the blade. Then her fingers touched the grip, and she had it.

She turned to face the fiend, just in time to see Belmer's body flying toward her. They collided with stunning force, spinning across the ruined bridge, toward the open ravine. Belmer went clean over, tumbling into the darkness.

Sharessa slipped over the edge. She clutched the sword with one hand, groping for purchase with the other. Her fingers closed on empty space, but then her crooked arm caught in a wide crack. She

felt her arm wrenched hard, nearly torn from her body, but she hung onto the bridge.

"No!" came Brindra's voice from above. Sharessa craned her neck to look up. The fiend had Brindra by the hair, bending her face back, forcing her to look into its face. It leaned in toward her in horrid parody of a lover bending for a kiss.

"Brindra!" cried a muted voice from the far side. Rings and the others could never break through the wall of ice in time to help, and the bridge kept crumbling beneath them.

Sharessa felt Brindra's cutlass in her hand, but she couldn't pull herself up. Her right arm was numb, wedged tight in the crack. If she freed herself, she would fall. If she didn't, she couldn't reach the fiend before it killed Brindra.

Above Sharessa, the creature ran a gentle finger across Brindra's fat cheek.

"Damn you!" spat Brindra. Her arms hung limp at her sides. The fiend pulled her hair back farther and grinned. The finger stroked again, this time drawing a red line from Brindra's eye to the corner of her lip. Sharessa heard Brindra's gasp, but she knew the sea-toughened pirate wouldn't give the fiend the pleasure of a scream. In the years Sharessa had sailed with her, Brindra had howled in rage, shouted in surprise, and cursed and yelled in pain. But she had never screamed. The fiend must have sensed that. It stopped playing with Brindra and did other things.

Horrible things.

Sharessa turned her face away. She awkwardly slipped Brindra's cutlass through her belt, then reached up to grasp at the wedge that pinned her arm. If she could pull her captured arm out just a bit, then hook a leg up...

Brindra screamed. Sharessa looked up to see the fiend pulling Brindra's flesh apart in pages, gazing inside as if at an interesting book. Its motions were small and careful. It peeled and poked, each gesture evoking a wretched howl from the dying woman.

"No!" cried Sharessa. She pulled up too hard, and the stone that pinned her arm fell away. Her other hand grabbed at the bridge, but she gained bare purchase.

The fiend shook its head lightly at Sharessa, then raised a single bloody finger to its mouth, shushing her. Wait your turn, it seemed to say.

Horror devoured the strength that fear had given her, and Sharessa slipped from the bridge. Brindra's last, sustained scream followed her all the way to the bottom, where the water swallowed it up with Sharessa's consciousness.

Chapter Six

Whispers by Moonlight

After the stunning impact with the water, Sharessa could feel and see nothing. Her senseless limbs were numb and floating. She heard the sound of the river and knew she must be drowning. Death by water, she thought. The river would quench her life and carry her body out to sea. That was a fitting doom, she decided, since she had spent much of her life sending others to wet graves.

"Can you speak?" asked Belmer. Sharessa blinked and realized that she wasn't drowning. Her thoughts tumbled in her head, the last stones rattled by the fall from the bridge. She felt Belmer's arms around her, the slender muscles hard and fine, supporting her. Together they drifted with the current, their bodies weightless in the darkness.

"Ah," began Sharessa. Her tongue was thick in her mouth. "Ah-I think so," she slurred.

"Good," replied Belmer.

"I can't feel my arm," said Sharessa. The feeling was returning to the rest of her body, though the river seemed icy cold.

"Is it broken?"

"I'm not sure." Sharessa tried moving her right arm but couldn't feel a thing. She touched it with her left. In the cool water, the arm felt puffy and dead. She squeezed her upper arm slightly. The pain was bearable.

"No, I don't think so."

"Anything else?" asked Belmer. He shifted behind Sharessa, giving her more room to move while still supporting her in the water. Sharessa was glad for his help, and not only because she needed it. It was her experience that any man who held her in his arms was much more susceptible to her persuasion, when it became necessary. Unlike most other women pirates Sharessa had met, she knew both how to take care of herself and when to let a man think he was taking care of her. Brindra would have been kicking the man away already, spitting that she could damned well help herself.

Thinking of Brindra reminded Sharessa of something else. She felt for the dead woman's sword. There it was, safe in her belt. It would need a new hand, now that Brindra was dead. That thought hurt, surprisingly.

The river glittered before them, and they drifted into a field of

milky luminescence. Sharessa saw that the cliff face here was pale stone, probably granite. Its face reflected the moonlight down into the water. She turned to face Belmer, and he shifted his grip to hold her arms, keeping her from drifting away from him. He stared back up at the granite, dark eyes scanning its lines and shadows.

"Here's a likely place. Can you swim now?"

"I think so," said Sharessa. She kicked her legs, treading water. While she ached everywhere, only her right arm was still useless. "Yes. Let's go."

They swam to the rocky cliff. At its base was a narrow shore of stones and mud, with a few small patches of thick river grass and reeds. Sharessa began to climb up onto the rocks, then winced as she placed too much weight on her bruised arm. Belmer helped her to her feet, and she leaned against him. She thought she felt his muscles tense defensively at her gesture. Then he softened and slipped an arm around her waist.

She knew he was tallying physical injuries. "I have the sword," she said. Brindra's sword."

"Good."

"Here," said Sharessa, trying to draw it from her belt. "You take it."

"Don't you want to keep it?"

"I've seen you fight," said Sharessa. "It's more use in your hand than mine." Then she asked, "Have you ever met your match with a blade?"

The long silence that followed made Sharessa think she had offended him. Just before she was about to take back the question, Belmer replied. "Maybe. Once."

Sharessa smiled in the darkness. That admission sounded hard for him. Was he so proud? "Well, at least he didn't manage to kill you," she said. "Nor I him," said Belmer. "And he used two swords, which was cheating." Now there was amusement in his voice. Self-mockery? Sharessa wouldn't have imagined that before, but she was beginning to see beyond Belmer's shifting facades. At least, she liked to think she was.

Sharessa had never had trouble penetrating the veils that men use to obscure their motives. Black-fingers had also been a mystery to her, at first. It hadn't taken Sharessa long to insinuate herself into his council, earning his trust and later his affections. He was much more likely to listen to her opinion after they had begun sharing a bunk most nights. She liked to think that her motives were never entirely selfish. Never did she misuse Blackfingers's trust, nor did she betray the secrets he had shared with her. As whether she was merely using him, Sharessa truly had cared for Blackfingers far more than she

realized until it was too late, and he was dead. Unlike Kurthe, who sought to punish Blackfingers's killer, Sharessa wanted only to replace the loss, to fill the void.

At first, Belmer was exciting and impressive. While most of the other Sharkers hated his mysterious agenda and private council, Sharessa found him the more intriguing for it. She always loved the shadows more than the daylight. Was Belmer smiling in the darkness, too? Sharessa couldn't see his face. The moon had fallen too low to spill light this far into the ravine. She craned her neck to see that the upper half of the far cliff side was still illuminated in the ghost light.

"Did the others get off the bridge?"

"I couldn't tell. There was some more shouting after you fell, but I think they fled."

"How will we find them?" "I don't know."

"They need Brindra's sword, or they don't have a chance." Sharessa began to fear for their lives. It was hard to lose Blackfingers, but Ingrar's blindness and Brindra's death shouldn't have hurt so badly. Sharessa often had seen companions die in her years as a pirate. She knew it could happen to her or to one standing beside her. If Tempus was asking Sharessa who would die next, then the answer was always, "Thankee kindly, but I'll have mine later." Now, however, Sharessa was beginning to think she'd trade her life just to make sure that Anvil or Belgin had Brindra's enchanted sword to use against the fiend that stalked them.

Belmer looked up at the cliff. "I can't make it up there and carry you," he said.

"You can leave me here," she replied.

"Well wait a while first. If the others don't come along after half hour, I'll try the climb."

"What makes you think they'll be able to search for us with that fiend behind them?" Sharessa didn't like the idea of being left down here while Belmer ascended the cliff, but she knew she couldn't make the climb with her wounded arm.

"Without me, no one collects their money," he replied with a little shrug.

"I thought you weren't worried about the money anymore," said Sharessa. She saw the black line of Belmer's smile in the reflected light.

"What's the point of our being here, if not for the money?"

"After what you told Anvil, I thought you cared more about just..."

"Oh, Shadow," Belmer said, chuckling. "What would you have told him? It was the only thing he would hear from me. Perhaps you could have found a subtler persuasion. You have a greater talent for it than

I."

Sharessa pushed away from him, standing apart. She didn't like the way he was laughing. Was he mocking her? Did she seem so transparent? Her frown must have told him what she was thinking.

"Besides, it was true," he said soothingly. "How can we enjoy our reward if we don't survive to collect it."

"I saw the way you looked at Ingrar when we stopped," countered Sharessa. "You weren't worried just about the money then."

Belmer chuckled again. "What? Did you think I'd gone paternal on the boy?"

"So why didn't you order him left behind?"

"And spark a mutiny? Come, Shadow, there's no profit in mercy. Taking Ingrar with us kept Anvil and Brindra from fighting me. He was valuable, so we kept him."

"You don't really think that way, do you?"

"Of course I do. So do you. What did you do before we met? You killed people for their cargo."

"I'm not denying that," said Sharessa. Her own bitterness surprised her. "But Ingrar's a mate. We're loyal to each other."

"Loyalty is just another contract," Belmer stated.

"What?"

"What's loyalty but a promise of help in return for the same? You're loyal to Anvil and Rings and the rest because you know that they'll watch your back in return. It's an informal agreement, but it's just a contract, no different from the one you signed for me."

"It's completely different," said Shar. "It's a matter of trust."

"Isn't trust what a contract is for?"

"Of course not! Contracts are for when you don't trust someone."

Belmer laughed again. "The only difference is that contracts are written, and your promise of loyalty is never spoken."

"Even so, that's a big difference in itself."

"I don't think so," said Belmer. "Every man does just what pleases him, and contracts are a way to keep others from interfering with his wishes."

"So what about priests and lords who give their money to the poor?"

"They do it because it pleases them." Belmer shrugged again, but he was no longer looking at Sharessa. He seemed bored with the conversation and turned his attention to the cliff above.

"How can it please someone to give up all his wealth and live like a beggar, just to spread a few coins around a crowd that'll live and die in filth anyway? What's the pleasure in serving others who don't have the strength to take for themselves? That's sacrifice. It's charity."

"No, that's foolish," said Belmer, still watching the cliff. "But it

pleases those who think their gods will reward them for it. Even a priest behaves kindly because he thinks there's spiritual profit in it for him." Belmer stopped staring at the cliff and looked straight at Sharessa.

"There's nothing good in this world, Shadow. Everyone seeks profit, whether that's gold, power, pleasure, or passing crusts to beggars because II-mater will love you for it. You get what you take by your own strength and cunning, and when someone interferes with that, you kill him. That's what I do, and that's what you do. It's what we are."

Sharessa stared back at Belmer, wanting desperately to argue with him. If he'd put it another way, if they'd laughed at the misfortune of some ship they'd robbed together over cups of ale in a Tharkaran tavern, then she'd smile or laugh or make a joke in response. But put so seriously, examined so plainly, this life didn't seem exciting. It seemed wicked and cold, like the fiend that hunted them for its own pleasure. Cruelty was that monster's profit.

Her damp clothes seemed suddenly cold, and Sharessa hugged herself against an imagined wind. The sudden pain in her right arm made her wince, but it warmed her slightly. That twinge made her think that maybe what set her apart from the fiend was that she sought profit in pleasure rather than pain. Maybe that was the important difference, the thing that made her human.

She looked up to renew the argument with Belmer, but he had already crouched low against the cliff wall. She felt his cool hand touch her belt, tugging her gently to join him. Sharessa crept into the shadow beside Belmer, and he leaned close to whisper.

"Something's coming."

Chapter Seven

Bait

Doubt drew the moment thin and tight as a bowstring. Sharessa felt a nauseous, uncertain quivering in her stomach as she strained to hear the sound that had alerted Belmer. Distance shushed the echoes of something coming through the forest above.

When Sharessa saw torchlight reflected on the far cliff, she felt her own smile and rose to her feet to call out, but Belmer squeezed her left hand to stop her. He put his lips near her ear and whispered, "Wait."

They listened carefully, almost painfully. Sharessa heard the faint sound of voices far above.

"It's them," she whispered to Belmer.

He hesitated a moment longer. "This fiend has tricked us with illusions before."

Sharessa nodded and drew Brindra's sword from her belt. "Here," she said, offering it to Belmer. This time he did not protest.

"Call out. I'll climb, in case it's another of the fiend's tricks." He faded into the shadows before Sharessa could reply.

"Rings!" called Sharessa. "Anvil! Belmer! I'm down here!"

"Shar!" came the dwarf's reply. Then they all called out questions for a moment before falling suddenly silent again. Sharessa was sure it was really them; they'd remembered the fiend might hear them. Soon they lowered the rope that they had salvaged from the Morning Bird.

"My arm's hurt," called Sharessa from the bottom of the cliff. She hoped her voice was loud enough for them to hear, but not so loud that it carried down the ravine. "You'll have to pull me up."

She looped the rope around herself and secured it as best she could with one arm. She tugged once, hard.

"Belmer?" she whispered. But he did not answer. She wondered whether he was already climbing. The rope pulled taut, and she felt herself rise. She used her feet to guide her ascent, careful of her wounded arm. When she came to the top, eager hands pulled her into quick embraces and patted her on the back, careful of her arm.

"Brindra's dead," said Sharessa. She could see by their faces that they already knew it.

"At least you made it," said Belgin. His chubby face was lucent with moonlight. "We saw you fall."

"The water knocked me senseless, but Belmer found me before I

drowned."

"Belmer made it, too?" Rings sounded half disappointed, half astonished. "The fiend threw him like a doll."

"He's not human," interjected Turbalt. Sharessa marvelled that he still lived, while better fighters had already fallen to the fiend tonight. "He's a fiend himself! We should get out of here before he finds us again."

"Silence," said Belgin.

"I have a right to speak my mind," bleated Turbalt. "It was my ship you sank. They were my men you've let die — "

"Shut up, you fool!" This time it was one of his own crewmen who spoke. Turbalt didn't even pause.

"And I haven't been paid yet! By Umberlee, I'll have..."

"You'll have what?" Belmer's voice came smooth as a sharp knife from the shadows.

Turbalt's flabby face blanched, and his jowls shook as he jabbered his mouth silently. He didn't turn around to face the voice but shuffled back into the shadows. Belmer walked into the light, ignoring the frightened ship captain.

"Kill those torches, and hood the lamp. If the fiend doesn't know that you've found us, we may have an advantage we can use."

"What d'ye have in mind?" asked Rings. He stubbed out the torch he carried before Belmer could answer. One of the sailors did the same with the other, and Anvil shuttered the lantern. The scant light spilling through its covers cast tiny yellow stars on the faces of the company. "Listen carefully," said Belmer.

Rings and Anvil took the lead, each carrying a freshly lighted torch. Rings held his plain axe in his other hand, while Anvil clutched the unlighted lantern. Its hood was missing, and the remaining oil sloshed gently as they walked.

Sharessa knew that Anvil hadn't liked relinquishing his stewardship of the blinded Ingrar, but after exacting a promise from Belgin that the round-faced gambler wouldn't stray from the young pirate, he had relented.

The three survivors of the Morning Bird took up the rear this time. Turbalt kept pushing ahead of the other two, trying desperately to keep himself in the middle. The crewmen glared at the back of their former captain's head. They obviously despised him more than the Sharkers ever could. It was bad to be a weak and cowardly man, but it was far worse to be so when commanding the lives of others. They would never forgive him for that.

"He's using us as bait," whimpered Turbalt. His earlier histrionics had reduced his voice to a strangled mewling. "Belmer's sacrificing us to the fiend to save himself!"

Belgin reached out and slapped Turbalt in the back of the head with a quick hand. The fat ship captain stumbled to one knee. He rose, indignant and persistent.

"You know it's-" The heavy slap whipped his face around, harder than before. Belgin didn't speak a word. When Turbalt opened his mouth again, he just struck him again, harder still, spinning the fat man to the ground.

"That's enough," said Belgin softly. With the faintest of whimpers, Turbalt crawled to his feet and followed, this time taking up the rear.

Sharessa watched it all from the darkness. Her clothes remained damp from her plunge into the river, but the sultry night was uncomfortable. On this side of the river, the ground was soft and moist. The tall trees had shrunk and withered, their gnarled limbs painful in the shifting torchlight.

The breezes had fled, and in their wake had risen a miasma of insects. Where they stung, Sharessa felt her flesh contract and burn. She dare not slap at them as she shadowed the others, staying always just outside the torchlight, but not too far away. Instead, she squeezed the handle of Rings's everbright axe.

Somewhere on the other side of the torchlight was Belmer, his path mirroring Sharessa's. He bore Brindra's enchanted sword. Together they waited for the fiend to attack the others. They couldn't defend themselves without these two weapons, so Turbalt's words were true. Belmer had called it a lure, but the careless passage made them nothing more than bait. Sharessa and Belmer were the hooks.

The heat grew more intense, the insects ever fiercer. Sharessa wiped at her sweaty neck, and her hand came away a battlefield of bloody mosquito bodies. Another legion took their place, their buzzing growing louder in her ears.

Back in the torchlight, Turbalt and the sailors slapped at their faces and arms, cursing, then peering into the darkness to see if their noises had attracted attention. Sharessa could see by their halting gaits that they expected the attack at any moment. She knew how they felt. Her own muscles were sore from stopping at the crack of a twig, from twisting suddenly at the supernatural chill that passed like a winter cloud across the back of her neck.

Maybe the fiend never crossed the river, she half-hoped. She banished the thought as soon as it formed. That's what the thing would want them to think. They had to believe it would attack again, or else it would catch them by surprise yet again.

Something trembled the brush ahead of Sharessa. She stopped. Her blood turned to ice, and the mosquito bites spread like fire across her skin. She watched the spot carefully but saw nothing. The others hadn't heard the sound. They continued their journey.

The sound came again, this time behind the travelers. They spun around, the sudden movement of the torches creating a vertiginous whirl of shadows. Rings and Anvil brandished the torches like swords, holding their weapons like mere shields. Belgin swept Ingrar behind the warriors, and the sailors followed, forming a defensive square around the blind boy and the gambler.

Turbalt screamed and ran blindly into the woods- straight toward Sharessa. The rustling darkness followed him.

Sharessa slipped sideways, smooth as a serpent. The bumbling Turbalt crashed past her. Something hotter and darker than the night followed upon his heels. Sharessa raised the axe in both hands and struck.

The impact was tremendous; it evoked a squealing hiss and a blast of putrid breath. The axe rebounded, spinning Sharessa backward. She barely kept her double grip upon the dwarven weapon. She struck again before recovering her balance. Again her blade struck hard, but she felt the same unyielding impact, closer this time. The thing closed with her.

Sharessa threw herself backward, but one foot caught in the undergrowth. She felt a searing slash across her hip. Before another came, she thrust away. Dead roots twisted hard at her feet. She tore away, wrenching an ankle. As she stood, pain exploded in the twisted joint. She hopped to the side, but then an avalanche fell upon her.

Sharessa felt ragged fingers reach into her hair, pulling her head back. A bony knee pressed hard into her spine. She opened her mouth to scream, but her lungs were already squeezed empty. It was breaking her in half.

The fiend squealed again, this time in pain and rage. When it released Sharessa, the pirate rolled weakly to the side. She saw Belmer's lithe form in silhouette against the torchlight. He stood before the fiend, Brindra's sword pointed at its face. The torches came closer as Anvil and Rings charged forward.

Even crouched, the fiend towered over Belmer. Its arms and legs were long, with hard muscles knotted together in grotesque clusters. Claws whipped toward Belmer, blossoming like bony flowers. Brindra's sword licked out, and the fiend drew back its wounded hands. It held them to its mouth, and Sharessa heard a horrid sucking sound.

Belmer didn't give the fiend a chance to lick its wounds. He darted in, stabbing at its leg. Blood sprayed like a string of black pearls, glimmering briefly before splattering on the ground.

The fiend struck back with a scythelike motion. Belmer's parry materialized before the attack, but it was only a feint. The heavy tail crashed into the ground where Belmer had stood, but the little man

leapt above it, slashing at the fiend's face. The creature was too fast, slipping back just out of range of the sword.

It didn't hear the others until they were nearly upon it.

A burly sailor threw his shoulder into the back of the fiend's leg. The monster stumbled backward, turning to reach its attacker with its teeth and claws. The man had time for a single dying scream.

A torch smashed against its head, casting a halo of sparks about its skull. A second sailor backpedaled to escape, but he was too slow. The fiend's tail arched down, piercing the man's throat with its sharp barb. A dark spurt of blood crossed the sailor's face. He reached up with clumsy hands to staunch the flow, but his movements were weak and jerky. He sank to the ground.

A big shadow rose behind the fiend as it descended upon the fallen sailor. Anvil smashed the open lantern against the monster's back. The blow itself would have stunned or killed a man, but it merely surprised the creature, splashing it with lamp oil. Rather than press the attack, Anvil threw himself to the side, narrowly avoiding the fiend's powerful tail.

Rings was already on the fiend's other side. He smashed his flaming brand against the fiend's back. The oil ignited immediately, spreading across the monster's decaying flesh in a blue-white wave. The fiend raised its arms high above its head and shrieked, shaking its ragged claws at the sky.

Anvil and Rings backed up, watching the monster burn but ready for it to lash out. Belmer remained in his fencer's stance, ready for anything. Sharessa hobbled to a tree and held herself up, watching. The fiend kept on burning and screaming, but it did nothing to escape the flames. Then she realized that it wasn't howling in pain.

"It's laughing at us!" she cried out.

It turned toward her then, its lipless grin nearly splitting its fleshless face. The fiend took two slow steps toward her, and then Belmer flashed toward it, sword arm straight as a lance, lunging for the thing's chest.

The little man flew straight through the fiend. Despite his surprise, he recovered with a graceful roll that left him crouched and facing the opposite direction. It had simply vanished, leaving only its fiery corona and a stench of sulfur.

The Sharkers needed no order to regroup, backs to center, swords out and up. Sharessa was last to join them, hindered by her injured ankle. The last living sailor joined them, his face grim with the acceptance of his fate. Sharessa knew how he must feel.

"So much for our advantage," grumbled Anvil. "Now we're back where we started."

"No," said Belmer. "It's hurt, worse than before. If we're lucky, it's

angry."

"If we're lucky?" said Rings, incredulous.

Ingrar's scream was a bolt of lightning, galvanizing them all. Anvil was moving even before Belmer. They rushed toward the sound.

The fiend had Belgin by the throat, pressing the round-faced gambler into a tree. At the monster's feet curled Ingrar, seemingly uninjured, but paralyzed with terror. The fiend dropped Belgin as soon as they approached. It had used them as its own lure. Now it turned toward Belmer. It wanted revenge.

Belmer rushed toward the fiend, fainting at the last moment. This time the fiend wasn't surprised, and it sidestepped in the other direction, wagging its long finger at Belmer in a mockery of human admonishment. The slender man attacked again, this time in earnest. The fiend hopped backward and landed in a low, four-limbed stance, crawling sideways like the scorpion it resembled.

"Surround it," snapped Sharessa. She lagged behind the others but kept coming. "Help him!"

Rings, Anvil, and the sailor spread out. Only Rings still had a torch, and he waved it to attract the fiend's notice.

"Here, you great stinking spider!" he called. The fiend grinned and turned toward the dwarf. Belmer lunged, but the fiend had faked its distraction. It deflected Belmer's thrust with one arm. Brindra's sword cut a deep line into the gray flesh, but the fiend's other hand was a blur, clamping down on Belmer's wrist. The swordsman snapped a punch at the fiend's chin, but the monster only smiled. Then it clutched Belmer's arm in both hands and twisted.

"Ah!" Belmer didn't quite scream, but his eyes opened wide in the pain. The sword fell from his hands, and the fiend stepped on it. Then it lifted the squirming Belmer up toward its face, jaws wide.

Anvil and the sailor hit the fiend's legs together. They tumbled together, grasping and punching ineffectually, trying to wrestle with the thing. The fiend rose in the struggling mass, lifting Belmer by his arm. It threw him to the ground with bone-crunching force, reaching down to peel its attackers from its legs. Rings rolled away nimbly, but the monster's long fingers found the sailor.

Sharessa looked for Brindra's sword. She saw where it had fallen, but Rings's torch was moving, shaking the shadows. She went down on all fours to crawl, hoping the thing wouldn't see her before she reached the weapon.

Rings waved his torch like a flag, trying to distract the fiend from its prey. The captured sailor turned toward the dwarf, shaking his head to warn him away. Then the big tail swept out, more powerful than a loose boom in a storm. Sharessa heard the solid blow and saw her friend fall limp as an empty sack. His torch sputtered on the wet

ground and died beside him.

She heard her own gasp and stopped. The fiend hesitated, too, looking around slowly. Its face looked even more like a skull where it stood bathed in a shaft of moonlight. Its eyes moved toward where she crept in the darkness. Then the sailor spat a curse as foul as the fiend's breath and lashed out in futile struggle.

"Go ahead, you bastard! Do it! Do it!"

The man was brave. Sharessa saw his fingers seek the fiend's throat, even as the monster's claws scrabbled across his stubbly face. Then the curved claws found the man's eyes and thrust deeply. There wasn't enough time for a scream, only the fiend's howling laughter.

Sharessa scrambled for the sword, abandoning silence. All she could think about was the fiend's hot breath in her own face, its claws scratching upon her skin before tearing in and breaking her open. She grabbed at the ground, her hands feeling stones and soil and branches. She heard the frantic drum of her heart, the rush of blood throbbing in her ears. Her hands kept moving, rocks scraping her fingers, vines entangling them. Then she felt a light touch upon her shoulder. She smelled decaying flesh and brimstone.

But she also felt Brindra's sword beneath her knee.

Sharessa turned slowly and smoothly, her back upon the ground. The fiend straddled her, one hand on either side. It barely allowed its own body to brush against her, bearing down as gently as a lover.

Sharessa pressed herself against the ground, shrinking almost demurely. The fiend cooed and mewled, its arms curling around her from either side, almost tender in its mockery of seduction. Sharessa's hand extended slowly beside her thigh, reaching. She gagged from the stench, closing her eyes lest the moonlight reveal its face and she scream.

Her fingers reached the sword just as the fiend's arms closed tightly around her. She felt its jagged teeth on her cheek. She drew back her arm and pressed the point of the blade against its belly.

"Back to hell," she said, shoving Brindra's sword deep into the monster. The fiend bucked and shrieked, and Sharessa felt its steaming ichor wash over her arms. She thrust again, pulling up to find the monster's heart. Its claws savaged her back, raking deep wounds, but still she held tight, forcing the blade deeper still.

Then the screaming stopped. The fiend's grip evaporated, and the creature crashed to the ground like a rotten tree.

Chapter Eight

Beside the Fountain

When one of them stumbled, another was there to help. Belmer even took a turn carrying Ingrar, who had fallen deeply asleep again. Anvil had let the boy go reluctantly.

"And who'll carry your heavy carcass when you drop dead of exhaustion?" Sharessa had said.

None of them spoke of Brindra, but Rings was obviously thinking of nothing else. The usually cheerful dwarf stared grimly ahead, marching as if into death rather than away from it. Sharessa knew how he felt, but her own sadness was mingled with the joy of survival. She tried to think of those who lived rather than those who had died.

They stopped to rest often, first in rolling meadows, later in cultivated fields. They were coming closer to the city.

"You can spend a day to recuperate," Belmer said. "That will give me the time I need to learn the city." Sharessa wondered whether his decision was based solely on expediency. She liked to think that their employer had come to care about the others as she did. She hoped Belmer had become a Sharker.

The sun was high and bright by the time they reached the city gates. Eldrinpar was far better fortified than Sharessa had remembered, but she had always visited by sea before. When she saw higher walls and new battlements, she thought of the fiends they had faced last night. If the bloodforges continued to draw the monsters to Doegan, how long could the city withstand them?

"If we are questioned at the gate, we were caravan guards," said Belmer. "The fiends attacked us between here and-what is the name?"

"Parsanic," said Anvil.

"Parsanic," agreed Belmer. "We don't have time for questions about Redbeard and the Morning Bird. I want to locate the bloodforge and get on with it."

"You mean the woman," said Belgin, smiling faintly.

"That, too," said Belmer. His own smile was brief and businesslike. "But also the bloodforge."

Low adobe homes sprawled outside the walls of Eldrinpar. Mar children played on the unpaved streets, their brown faces laughing through the dust. Sharessa noticed Belmer's gaze follow them. His eyes narrowed in thought or memory.

"Many of the Mar live outside the city," explained Sharessa. "Most

of them are farmers or servants. Some will never be more than beggars."

Belmer nodded but said nothing. His eyes rested on a small Mar youth standing apart from the rest. The boy leaned carelessly against the city wall, inconspicuous in the shade. He watched the other children play but did not join them.

"Only if they choose to remain so," remarked Belmer. Sharessa composed a question in her mind but left it there. They approached the gate, where fair-skinned guards stood watching the traffic. They stood alert at the sight of the Sharkers.

"Who are you?" asked one of the guards bluntly.

"Travelers from Parsanic," said Sharessa. "The caravan we were hired to guard ran afoul of fiends."

The gate guards seemed briefly dubious, but the Sharkers' wounds were proof enough that they had run afoul of something.

"You look more like pirates than caravan guards," remarked one guard, looking at their clothes. He didn't sound as though he were joking. Sharessa stepped toward him, trying to capture his eyes with her smile. The guard was looking at Belmer's foreign features and frowning. She had to take his attention off the others.

"We usually sign on for ship voyages, it's true," she said, leaning closer. The guard finally met her eyes. Shar tugged idly on a shirt lace. The man's gaze followed as expected. There.

"We're exhausted," she said. She placed her warm hand gently on the guard's arm. "Can you recommend a good place to sleep?"

The rest was easy.

Within the gates, Eldrinpar was a different city. Aquatic images dominated the architecture, with wave patterns and marine imagery common on the grander buildings. The people were taller than the Mar, their skins more fair. Their clothes-flowing, brightly colored silks-were better, and they smiled confidently where they walked.

Not far past the gate stood a colossal fountain. From its center rose the huge bronze figure of a man wrestling an octopus that was rising from the ocean. Water jetted forth from every wave, pouring down into the wide basin. At its edges, people drew water in buckets or cupped hands.

That's what I need," said Belgin. "I'm parched."

He hurried toward the fountain. The others were quick to follow.

Sharessa dipped her cupped hands in carefully, pouring the cool water over her sticky face. Then she began to wash her hands in earnest, letting the dirty water run off into the street. She looked up to see Belmer leaning upon the fountain's edge, eyes closed in thought. Next to him, Anvil was wringing Ingrar's bandages dry. Bloody

rivulets trickled into a drain in the street.

Rings sat alone at the edge of the fountain, staring dejectedly at the rippling water. Sharessa imagined that he saw Brindra's face in his own reflection. She moved over to sit next to the dwarf.

"We haven't had time to say goodbye," she said. "Not to Brindra or Kurthe, or even to Blackfingers."

Rings nodded. If his earrings jingled, the trickling water of the fountain obscured the sound.

"Maybe that's good," said Sharessa. Rings looked up at her, puzzled.

"Maybe it's better that we don't say goodbye. Remember when you and Brindra came back to Kissing Shark after drinking with those savages all day in Tharkar? What was that stuff called?"

"Koumiss," said Rings. He looked back into the water, the shadow of a smile dying on his lips. "Terrible stuff. Blackfingers was ready to have us both keelhauled just to get the smell off the ship."

"But then Brindra said, 'If you dip him into the ocean, you'll kill all the fish for a mile, and then what'll we have for supper?'"

Rings snorted, but his smile became more fond than sad. "Then she shoved me over the side, saying, 'Ah, I'm tired of fish, anyway'"

They both laughed a little, and the smiles lingered with their sadness.

Sharessa stood. "You know what Brindra would do now, if she were here?"

Rings looked up at her. "What?"

"This!" Sharessa pushed him hard, and Rings plunged into the water. He came up sputtering and furious. But when his eyes met Sharessa's, he burst into laughter. She offered him a hand to help him back out, ready to let him pull her in for revenge, but then Belmer stepped close.

"Stop that. We're drawing attention."

Sharessa pulled Rings out of the water and turned around. She followed Belmer's gaze to a group of armed men who had also been drinking from the fountain. They didn't look like residents of Doegan. Their clothes were of a different fashion, and their faces were foreign. They wore heavy armor and carried hammers and swords. Sharessa noticed that the cowardly Captain Turbalt stood among them, glancing at the Sharkers as he spoke to the tallest of the outlanders, a warrior clad in silver armor. When he saw Belmer staring back at him, he moved behind the armored men.

"Let's go," said Belmer. No sooner did the Sharkers comply than the foreigners stepped forward.

"Hold there," said the silver one. "We would speak with you."

"Perhaps later," said Belmer, smiling falsely. "We have pressing

business in another part of the city." To the Sharkers, he said quietly, "Keep moving."

The outlanders hefted their weapons and spread out to intercept the Sharkers. Sharessa saw that several of them wore the symbol of a hammer as their badge. Were they foreign soldiers? Knights of an order? Adherents of the Fallen Temple?

"I said hold," commanded the tall knight again. "What are you doing in Doegan."

"That is no concern of yours," replied Belmer.

"I beg to differ," said the knight. "It can be no coincidence that upon my first visit to the Utter East I find the Sword Coast's most notorious assassin."

Surprise passed over Belmer's face like the shadow of a swift bird. In its wake was left a steely gaze aimed directly at Turbalt. The fat ship captain swallowed hard, then edged behind the knight, who spoke again.

"Tell us why you have come here, Artemis En-treri."